EXPLORING THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND

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Abstract

The position of children and young people (and the concepts of childhood and youth) have become increasingly politicised throughout the twentieth century; dominated by a 'youth as risk' discourse, there is increased public concern and political drive to protect children, prevent 'problem youth' and create a productive adult citizen for future society. To address this growing concern, recent UK education policy has been refocused to include 'soft' outcomes for educational success, in particular youth aspirations and their association with educational attainment and upward social mobility. Young people in the North East of England are said to have low educational and career aspirations which prevent them from fulfilling their potential. This qualitative research, conducted from 2006 to 2009, examines the influence of structural, contextual and individual factors upon the education and employment aspirations of six young women aged 10-14 in North East England. I examine 'difference' within the lived experiences these participants, consider its impact upon their aspirations for the future, and evaluate the role of young people as 'agents of change' with regards to their own lives. Methods of data collection included semi-structured interview, focus group, participatory diagramming, memory book, and participant-as-researcher. The sample size supports a micro-level exploration of the participants' lives, examining their developing aspirations in context and capturing the complex interrelatedness of agency, locality and social structures.

My empirical data illustrates the complicated and multi-faceted range of influencers interacting to shape young women's aspirations. I argue that whilst social structures continue to have a powerful influence upon aspirations for education and employment, the interaction of a range of other factors makes understanding aspirations less predictable and offers a space for young women to shape their own transition from education to employment. In normalising particular classed notion of aspirations through education policy, I illustrate how social constructs of youth affect participants' transitions through the provision of resources and guidance to realise aspirations. Whilst my data showed participants continued to aspire within traditional discourses of femininity, I argue young women can influence their own trajectory if exposed to an appropriate role model, relevant guidance, and an opportunity to develop reflexive skills within an environment which recognises their individual needs and context.

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Acknowledgements

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, the position of children and young people (and the concepts of childhood and youth) have become increasingly politicised as a reflection of and contributor to a great public concern regarding their deterioration and need for protection. This rising panic about 'youth as risk' (Turnbull and Spence, 2011) began in the early 1990's, when "widely proclaimed assumptions about the demise of 'childhood', the ill-discipline of children and the lawlessness of youth, consolidated in popular and political discourse" (Goldson, 2011, p.2), with 'risk' underpinning UK policy on children and young people since 1996 (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). This complex amalgamation of youth and risk translates into a view of the young person as "vulnerable to external risks… a risk to themselves… and a risk to society, either now or in the future" (Turnbull and Spence, 2011, p. 941). Seeing 'youth as risk' thus justifies government policy on prevention and control intervention within childhood and youth (Turnbull and Spence, 2011) in order to preserve "preferred or ideal adult futures" (Kelly, 2000, p.468) and stop children turning into 'problem youths'. More recently, UK policy has focused upon the impact of the widening gap in educational attainment between the wealthy and poor of society, viewing education as the "…answer to current economic, political and social problems" (Hughes and Tight, 1995, p.290). Subsequently, a raft of policy measures were implemented under New Labour in response (e.g. DCSF/DIUS, 2008; DCSF, 2007a, 2007c; DfES, 2006a, 2005a, 2005b, 2004; DfEE, 2000). In an attempt to shape children's future lives as productive (adult) citizens, policy focuses on labour market needs and improving the skills base "in and through present adult constructions of childhood" (James and Prout, 1997, p.245); such policy and subsequent practice generate "…a very utilitarian version of what it is to be a young person in contemporary society" (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.59).

Within policy and education, a notable shift of focus occurred to include the 'soft', less quantifiable outcomes of educational success alongside the existing 'hard', measureable outcomes, with a particular fixation upon young people's aspirations and their association with educational attainment. With this burgeoning interest came the need for a greater understanding about young people's aspirations generally, how policy was translating into practice and impacting upon developing aspirations, and how to raise aspirations as a means of reducing the gap between the wealthy and poor. My study follows other research which has explored the developing aspirations of young people (e.g. Garg, Melanson and Levin, 2007; Henderson *et al.*, 2007; Archer *et al.*, 2005; Nayak, 2003;

Katz, 2002; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Andres *et al.*, 1999; Furlong and Biggart, 1999) and, on the whole, I am in agreement with Gutman and Akerman (2008, p.1) that "…understanding the development of aspirations is not a straightforward task." More straightforward, however, is the current political and public concern with the UK's 'youth in crisis', including their aspirations, or lack thereof (Goldson, 2011; Prince's Trust, 2011; Stewart, 2011; Mizen, 2004).

With specific reference to the North East of England, Benneworth and Tomaney (2003) note that high levels of deprivation and unemployment across a number of generations have resulted in a deep-seated problem with the aspirations of children and young people within the region. North East youth are said to have low educational and career aspirations (GONE, 2004), which can prevent them from fulfilling their potential. The region has one of the lowest percentages of 16-17 year olds participating in post-compulsory education or training, and the lowest rate of participation in full time higher education (GONE, 2004). The decline in educational attainment post-key stage 1 has been partly attributed to a "poverty of aspiration" in the region (Vardy, 2006:1). This phrase is illustrative of a common thread throughout the sociology of childhood and youth, throughout policy and indicative of our interest in youth aspirations: that of the 'standard' young person, a mould which all young people are expected to fulfil, and if they do not, they are deficient in some way. In terms of aspirations, this indicates a 'value' rating of high/low aspirations, or a categorisation of 'appropriate' aspirations for young people to possess. For example, in choosing not to pursue post-compulsory education, policy texts assume this to be a reflection of "low aspirations among working class young people", which is met with a government response to raise aspirations thereby increasing "their motivation and engagement with learning" (Archer et al, 2005, p.109). I refer to this as a 'deficit' account of youth aspirations and discuss the implications of this for the young women engaged.

1.2 Origins of research

The Aspire[1] campaign was launched in the North East of England in 2004. Targeted at young people aged between 11 and 25, the campaign intended to engage young people in understanding the diverse range of job opportunities that existed in the North East, raise

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[1] Aspire Partnership Ltd was a private, non profit-making company, jointly owned by the North East Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Confederation of British Industry (CBI), with key business leaders comprising the board of directors. The campaign objectives were: to encourage and motivate young people in order that they achieve the type of qualifications needed to meet the North East's present and future needs, and to meet the growing demand from local employers for skilled and motivated employees.

their aspirations and engage regional employers. Aspire wanted to better understand what influenced young people's developing aspirations so funded a postgraduate research studentship to examine this. This studentship offered me an opportunity to combine my undergraduate subject interests (sociology of childhood and youth), employment skills (within social research) and my personal interest in the topic of youth aspirations. I was sensitive to the issues arising around policy on youth aspirations as a result of my own journey through education and into employment as a young woman from a working class family in the North East. I was in agreement that the existing gap in evidence in the region highlighted by Aspire left our young people without a voice in terms of potential policy and practice implications.

Much of the literature on youth transition is preoccupied with macro-level statistical data, which provides an overall view of historical trends and comparative data, but tends to "…gloss over the diversity or contradictions […] within the data, [telling] us little about the underlying personal reasons, cause and choices which helped to constitute those trends" (Looker and Dwyer, 1998:11). Most of this existing research is context-specific and has not included the Northern regions of England therefore "…local and regional idiosyncrasies" have not been accounted for (Ball et al, 2000:21). This research was conducted from 2006 to 2009 and tells the stories of six young women aged 10-14 years in the North East of England. The participants represent a range of backgrounds with the intention of examining 'difference' amongst the group; for example, faith, ethnicity, social class, locality, family composition, type of schooling etc are some of the characteristics which set their experiences apart (or in some cases offer degrees of similarity). A small scale, case study approach is used in recognition of the need to construct a "comprehensive picture" of what is happening in the lives of young people (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001, p.41) and their developing aspirations for education and employment.

Engaging a small sample of young women across a 21 month period enables the collection of in-depth qualitative data, which discloses personal (or 'micro') experiences but also insight into "…the changing social and economic conditions, cultures and institutional frameworks through which ordinary lives are lived." (Mason, 2006:14). Collecting qualitative data in this way gives an impression of both the individual life in context alongside the collective experience of youth, bridging the areas between individual, context and structure, "…grasping what is going on at the point in people's lives where biography and society intersect" (Booth and Booth, 2003:440). From a social constructionist perspective, I view childhood and youth as produced and reproduced by society through shared meanings and conventions; in the same vein, I believe children

and young people are competent, actively construct their own social worlds and are capable of participating in research (Danby and Farrell, 2005; 2004; MacKay, 1991). My research design reflects this position, emphasising a flexible and engaging suite of methods to encourage participants to take control and convey their thoughts, experiences, insight etc.

1.3 Aims

The principal aims of this research study are:

- To critically analyse the structural (e.g. social class), contextual (e.g. region) and individual factors that influence the aspirations of young women;
- To examine 'difference' within the lived experiences of young women today and consider its impact upon their aspirations for education and employment;
- To investigate the role of young people as 'agents of change' with regards to their own lives and transitions;
- To explore each case within a social constructionist framework of childhood and youth, and examine the individual and collective implications of the case studies for relevant theory and policy.

1.4 Thesis structure

A brief outline of my thesis follows:

Chapter Two: Literature review

This chapter discusses key theory and the context of my study, including evidence regarding the various factors interacting to influence young people's developing aspirations for education and employment. These factors are referenced as structural, mediating/connecting and agential. Relevant policy and practice is also highlighted.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter I justify my research design, methods, sample of participants, access, ethical considerations and data analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings

In chapter four, I present my empirical data, with discussion focused on three analytic sets which emphasise key themes, including: labelling and resource provision; critical incidents and impact on aspirations; strong support networks and positive self-concepts.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion
Here I synthesize key themes from chapter four, in light of literature in chapter two, to address my research aims. Limitations and suggestions for further research are also included.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

Within this chapter, I will discuss the social construction of childhood and youth, highlight important connections between aspirations and educational attainment, and describe the context of youth aspirations within North East England. Following a short definition of relevant terminology, I will then consider existing literature on youth aspirations and the potential influencers, which broadly speaking include structural, mediating and agential factors. Finally, I examine the policy solutions designed to 'raise' young people's aspirations and 'solve the problem' besetting youth today. At the chapter's end, I will have framed my research within the existing evidence base as an exploration into young women's aspirations for education and employment in North East England, which will emphasise the impact of a 'deficit' account of youth and their own agency upon their developing desires for the future.

2.2   Childhood and youth as social constructions

Traditional concepts of childhood and perceptions of children originate in a developmental model of linear progression, from irrational and incomplete child to logical and rational adult. Within this framework, 'the child' is viewed as "biologically given", being shaped by "…a body of assumptions [which] defines what the 'child' and 'childhood' should be" (Gittins, 1998, p.32, p.7). As Lavelette and Cunningham (2002, p.9) explain: "…children are viewed as vulnerable, in need of protection (and perhaps discipline), and in some way incomplete […] Childhood is protected and respected, free from (adult) worries and responsibilities, a time of learning and play, a period of happiness and relative freedom." This socially constructed child has emerged from "a powerful adult myth, a series of stories and accounts" responsible for locating children as subordinate in society (Wyness (2006, p.26); children are expected to live a unitary childhood, regulated by laws, policies and social practices which ignore any difference between them (James and James, 2004). Ultimately, childhood is the invention of adults, reflecting their needs and fears, and shaped by the cultural assumptions of adult society (Gittins, 1998). It is significant for the study of childhood and youth that the pre-eminence of developmental psychology informs the very concept and understanding of what childhood is, the standards by which professionals working with children judge to be normal experiences for children and young people. The "high status" of developmental psychology as "the principal way into understanding children" informs the practice of

professionals, including "police, social workers, educationalists, health workers, legal workers, policy-makers" (Mayall, 2006, p.13). The tendency of this developmental model of childhood "ignores the actual social experiences of childhood (Jenks, 1982, p.12).

Most people would assert they 'know' what children and young people are, what childhood and youth is like, yet social constructionists do not rely on this knowledge because it "…depends on the predispositions of a consciousness constituted in relation to our social, political, historical and moral context" (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.27). Such knowledge is upheld through social processes and practices so that it becomes an observation of the 'truth'; these 'truths' "become sedimented in social processes and institutional practices" (Lewis, 1998, p.2) and influence, in this case, the meanings attached to childhood and youth. The socially constructed child is far from universal; a plurality of childhoods "coexist, overlap and conflict with each other" (Prout, 2005, p.63), with childhood itself as "variable and intentional" (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.27). Social constructionism views children as active agents, living in a world of meaning which is created both by themselves and through interaction with adults (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). My position within this research is to situate theoretical understanding and empirical data within a framework which posits childhood and youth as globally recognised phenomena in biological terms, but recognises and explores the locally diverse experiences influenced by both socio-cultural differences and young people's agency; this approach to understanding aspirations will enable a move away from deficit models which focus solely on, for example, the individual child from the 'problem' family or the young person with low aspirations as responsible for their 'deficiency'.

2.3   Basic skills, developing aspirations and long-term outcomes

It seems for many people their ability to navigate childhood and youth is influenced by their grasp of basic skills; for example, Shapka, Domene and Keating (2006, p.354) found students with low attainment in maths "…start with lower expectations for their careers [and] their aspirations declined at a much more rapid pace from mid high school onwards". Given the current situation in the UK in which one in six young people leave school unable to read, write or add up properly, the drive to raise standards to improve educational attainment and develop a population of skilled young adults is made all the more significant (HM Treasury, 2006). Unsurprisingly, employers are also dissatisfied with poor employability skills demonstrated by school leavers moving directly into jobs

(DfES, 2005a). Demand for higher level skills is currently not met by the workforce in the North East; although the number of workers with intermediate level skills is level with the rest of England, the proportion of highly skilled workers is far fewer (ONE, 2003). In Nayak's (2003, p.171) North East study, employers identified "a critical gap between skills, training and knowledge, and the broader aspirations of young people". Cieslik and Simpson (2006, p.224) suggest focusing on acquisition of basic skills to explore the processes that "…link the work of actors and the effects of social structures". Katz (2002) shares this view, although extends skills acquisition to include a group of abilities called 'life skills' (i.e. applying for work, preparing for parenthood, physical health, making relationships work, finding somewhere to live, dealing with stress, handling money), which are the key to unlocking young people's potential; not only were these skills,

> …a major contributory factor in how well young people felt they'd been prepared for the move towards achieving their career aspirations […] (p)eople with good life skills were far more self confident and believed they'd achieve their dreams… it is possible that improving life skills might contribute to raising their aspirations (Katz, 2002, p.32-33).

The DCFS (2007a, p.12) also report on the importance of social and emotional skills, which shape young people's self-perception, self-esteem and their ability to exert control over their lives; those young people who are most disadvantaged are "less likely to acquire these skills, leaving them at greater risk of developing poor outcomes". Skills are a determining factor in obtaining employment, with less than half of people with no qualifications in work nationally and almost 90% of graduates in employment (HM Treasury, 2006). Indeed successful entry into the labour market requires an investment in post-compulsory education and vocational training, and a related postponement of partnering/marriage and child-rearing (Yates, 2008).

2.4 Context: the North East of England

Statistically, the North East of England has "the lowest income per head, the largest proportion of communities characterised by multiple forms of deprivation, the lowest rates of employment, the lowest levels of educational attainment, the lowest rates of entrepreneurship and still, the highest rate of unemployment" (Tomaney, 2006, p.20). In terms of working role models for young people in the region, 20% of children live in workless households, a third more than the national average (Shewell and Penn, 2005), with almost one third of children in Newcastle living in poverty (Pearson, 2011). With one of the lowest percentages of 16-17 year olds participating in post-compulsory education or training, and the lowest rate of participation in full time higher education, young people

in this region are described as having low educational and career aspirations, which prevent them from fulfilling their potential (GONE, 2004). Educational achievement and aspirational level are interwoven; "…academic performance was the most substantial predictor of occupational aspiration scores" and young people's educational aspirations had "…a large association with young adults' educational attainment" (Marjoribanks, 2003, p.41, p.239).

Significant voices in the North East identify a "poverty of aspiration" (Vardy, 2006, p.1) as an influential factor upon the decline in attainment post-key stage 1. During a recent Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) North seminar, the then Children's Commissioner described "a poverty of expectation, a poverty of experience [and] a poverty of opportunity" as replacing more traditional notions of material poverty i.e. money, food, clothes (Aynsley-Green, 2008). Vardy and Aynsley-Green are referring to poverty as "a social relationship…framed not only by a lack of resources but by the way people are treated and perceived by others around them… the feeling of being separate and apart" (Novak, 2002, p.70) and the impact this can have upon educational outcomes and overall life chances. Katz's research (2002, p.11, p.42) illustrates the consequences of this:

> Without hope and optimism young people lose a sense of belonging or being valued […] There is a perception that holds people back as powerfully as any barrier. This may be borne of high local unemployment, cultural reluctance for [young people] to study further and poor guidance and understanding of the routes available, along with low school achievement scores… it is a pervading sense of inevitability that young people struggle to escape […] When young people feel there is no hope of fulfilling their aspirations there are serious social consequences.

This quote also illustrates the basis for recent government interest in youth aspirations: education standards cannot be raised nor a skills economy built without taking into account the lived realities of young people in the 21st century. These 'soft' qualities, including aspirations, are equally as important as hard, measurable outcomes (such as educational attainment), the former being in part responsible for influencing the latter (e.g. the relationship between aspirations and educational attainment). Vardy, Aynsley-Green and Katz have described a perceived barrier to aspirations among some young people, which is tangible upon their 'successful' transition into post-16 education and employment. However, in highlighting 'high/low' aspirations, these contributors also infer a 'value' rating upon aspirations for education and employment – essentially some aspirations are more valuable than others, and it is those aspirations which will develop

an efficient skills economy that take precedence. Government policy emphasises the significance of post-16 education, higher education qualifications and professional careers as key to success for young people transitioning from youth to adulthood; media discourse also carries this message to the population at large (as a contributor to social constructs of childhood/youth), including regular reporting of young people 'failing' to succeed at such an aspirational model. Framing the success or otherwise of youth transitions in this way and suggesting a 'poverty of aspiration' leaves young people themselves shouldering the responsibility for their own situation (successful or otherwise), rather than considering an alternative viewpoint, such as structural barriers to success or alternative routes to successful transitions through education to employment i.e. not higher education. Throughout my thesis, this particular framing of aspirations for education and employment as 'high/low', 'successful/failing' etc will recur and be referred to as a 'deficit' account of youth aspirations.

Although the region can claim relative success in employment opportunities in manufacturing and service industries (Tomaney, 2006), these areas are particularly vulnerable to change; large corporations invest in the region then retract services over a short space of time (Tomaney, 2006) and service sector employment is vulnerable to global relocation (Denny, 2003), so these routine forms of employment are "only loosely rooted in the region" (Richardson, Belt and Marshall, 2000; in Tomaney, 2006, p.10). Growth in public services employment (education, health services and public administration) has created many new jobs (Robinson, 2002); the longer term prospects of relying upon the public sector for economic output is viewed as a problem by some, encouraging a "growing dependence on the state" (Tomaney, 2006, p.20). By encouraging an over-reliance on public sector employment, which does not grow as rapidly as the private sector (ERN, 2005), it is predicted the wealth gap between this region and others will widen, the number of jobs will decrease, and "…our brightest and best will increasingly leave the region in order to build their business and create wealth" (Vardy, 2006, p.3). It is necessary to both attract those with the right skills to the North East alongside retaining the region's graduates to satisfy growth in service industries, including "knowledge intensive business services and health and social care" (ONE, 2006, p.23). Of the 70 North East companies participating in Minton's (2003) research, 54% were employing more people from outside the region; however, universities in the North East were reporting a substantial rise in the number of graduates opting to remain in the region post-graduation (Minton, 2003), thus contributing to the region's skills base.

2.5   Defining terminology

Using terms such as 'youth/young people' and 'childhood/children', whose meanings can be multiple, can create difficulties (Allan and Crow, 2001). It is important to define the "unit of analysis […] for purposes of clarification, because theorists often have different ideas about what it is they are studying" (Cheal, 1999, p.61). However, those concepts once defined must be used with a degree of reflexivity, giving due recognition to the "contextual contingency and partiality" of any given interpretation of a socially constructed truth (Nayak, 2003, p.31). In order to explore and better understand the aspirations of young people in the North East, it is important to first outline my terms of reference, including definitions of youth/childhood and aspirations.

The sample of participants engaged in my research were aged 10 to 14 years when the study commenced, bridging the range of ages considered to be childhood and youth. There is no single law to define the age of a child across the UK; whilst specific age limits regarding childhood are set out in relevant laws and government guidance, these are not standardized and there are differences within UK nations (http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/questions/definition_of_a_child_wda59396.html accessed 30.07.2010). For the purpose of this research, the terms childhood and youth are considered social categories, constructed and modified "according to social expectations regarding age brackets for participation in education, work, marriage, parenthood, consumption, and social welfare" (Heinz 2009). In the context of my research, the social status of childhood is discussed in terms of 'not adult' in law i.e. aged under 18 years old. Taking into account my original purpose for engaging participants of this age range (see chapter 3, Methodology) and reflecting the definitions offered above, the terms 'child', 'young person', 'childhood' and 'youth' will be used interchangeably.

> These terms have been subject to critique and should not be seen as biological stages (e.g. 'the pubescent teens') or psychological phases (e.g. 'adolescence') in an individual's development. Instead, 'youth' is treated here as a social and mutable category that continues to have different meanings in different times and places (Nayak, 2003, p.3).

Choosing to use 'young person' is an active decision to distance both the research and participants from traditional developmental concepts of children and childhood, which can carry patronising and derogatory connotations. Childhood and youth are viewed as a continuum and discussed as such; the terms will be used interchangeably throughout for

the purpose of including existing research on childhood and youth, and participants' age ranges.

An aspiration usually signifies "the achievement of something high or great", whereby an individual is able "to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work towards these goals" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.2). Research by Andres *et al.* (1999) is more specific in its separation of aspirations from expectations; the former is not affected by concerns about ability or accessibility, but aims for the 'dream' goal, whilst the latter are said to involve a more realistic assessment of future plans, including an evaluation of personal ability and achievement. Expectations, or 'realistic' aspirations as opposed to the 'idealistic' nature of unconditional, dream aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008), are "tied more closely to a form of reality testing, with [idealistic] aspirations being more akin to a vision of the maximum possible outcome […] Each communicates a slightly different dimension of youths' desires and plans" (Andres *et al.*, 1999, p.275, p.268).

Young people experience their lives like people of all ages, through relationships within their immediate environments, whether familial or institutional and, as a result, their aspirations are drawn from these relationships and the people around them. Ray (2006) suggests these immediate environments, or the social sphere, offer young people an 'aspirations window' through which they can view the possibilities and opportunities available to them within their given community, sometimes using their peers as a comparator. As each individual's aspirations window is embedded within their particular social sphere, "the notion of high versus low aspirations is subjective" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.3). The Prince's Trust (2004) found that the most important priority for most young people in the UK was having a family. The aspirations which then followed included having an interesting job, a nice home and making lots of money. While these more generic aspirations are fairly standard, for most young people they will require they obtain an adequate standard of education in order to secure employment; yet access to such education is influenced by macro-level structures affecting the opportunities and possibilities available to them. The impact of such structural forces (such as social class, gender, ethnicity) upon life circumstances is recognised as affecting the meaning and importance of aspirations:

> A strong assumption exists that higher educational and occupational aspirations connote more motivated individuals, whereas lower aspirations imply less commitment to learning and valuing of education. Yet, high aspirations for an individual with particular life circumstances may be considered low aspirations for another individual with different circumstances. The meaning and importance of

aspirations therefore vary according to the context in which people live as well as their own individual characteristics and development (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.3).

Whilst this may be the case, some aspirations for education and employment are shown to be more valuable than others, reflecting individual/personal aspirations (i.e. gaining employment in order to support their aspiration to have a family) and government aspirations (expressed through policy-making), which pursue their agenda to improve the UK skills base and economy.

As this study is exploring the aspirations of young people for education and employment, it is important to illustrate the significance of discussing aspirations for both education and employment as related concepts. Existing research demonstrates that young people themselves make the link between educational attainment and future employment prospects (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994; Keys, 2006). Indeed, in so far as structural forces (e.g. SES, gender) influence educational attainment, young people's aspirations and expectations for employment also contribute to this "…as predictors of future educational activity (e.g. university attendance) and eventual occupational attainment and status" (Andres *et al.* 1999, p.262). The influence of historical context is also significant in shaping aspirations for education and employment; social, economic and education policy of particular historical periods influence and are influenced by labour market demands and rates of employment, which in turn "directly affect occupational opportunities and educational requirements" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.4). It is evident the relationship between aspirations for education and employment is reciprocal and influenced by contextual (i.e. locality) and individual (i.e. ability) factors:

> …any judgements [young people] make about the value of continued education need to be understood in relation to their occupational aspirations which are affected by their perceptions of their ability as well as by their knowledge of the sorts of occupations available in the local labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994, p.9).

As Shavit and Muller (1998) explain, there are more young people participating in higher education now due to the increased educational requirements of the labour market.

In the recent past, research exploring youth aspirations has tended to focus on structural forces, including social class, urban-rural residence, gender, and local labour market opportunities (Krahn and Lowe, 1998; Furlong, Biggart and Cartmel, 1996; Looker, 1993; Gilbert and McRoberts, 1977; Breton, 1972), which "play a prominent role in patterning aspirations and expectations of youth" (Andres *et al.*, 1999*,* p.262). In this sense,

aspirations can be "…shaped, strengthened, weakened or curtailed by a range of factors that are external to the young person" (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.133). Other factors include individual characteristics, family background and proximal learning settings which, in combination, have large associations with young people's educational aspirations (Marjoribanks, 2003). Although research has succeeded in identifying a wide range of factors shaping the education and employment aspirations of young people, Brynin and Bynner (2003, p.2) concede that young people's aspirations for and decisions about education and employment continue to be "poorly understood". This may echo the concerns of Prout (2005) whereby separate elements (e.g. gender, ethnicity, social capital, peers) are well-researched but there is less evidence regarding the interrelationship of these (e.g. how gender interacts with ethnicity to influence aspirations, or how both structural elements interact with social capital to shape developing aspirations) and how they "combine in different ways to create unique experiences" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.24). If we can develop an understanding of "the intersection and contradiction among these multiple aspects of identity", it will be possible to support young people from diverse backgrounds in developing and fulfilling their aspirations (Gutman and Akerman (2008, p.25).

2.6   Developing aspirations: Key influencers

My intention is to achieve a cross-level analysis of young people's developing aspirations, taking into account the interrelationship of their various experiences within contemporary youth and the influence of their own actions upon these. Echoing the sentiments of Henderson *et al.* (2007, p.13), I attempted "to gain insight into the *relationship* between the unique life (biography), the context within which it is located (structure), and the processes that it is part of (e.g. history, social mobility, intergenerational transfers)" (own italics). By telling the stories of the six young people in my research, I examine a variety of influential factors across and within these areas, developing a complex and insightful picture of young people's aspirations for education and employment and providing a backdrop from which to discuss my empirical data. Reflecting my analytical framework (see figure 1 in chapter 3), I will now explore the research evidence thematically, as observed within the framework described, to include: social class, gender, ethnicity/faith; locality/place, social capital, learner identity; significant relationships (family, peers, teachers); individualisation and reflexivity (the young person as agent); policy and practice.

2.6.1 Influencing aspirations: Structural factors

While young people's pathways may be differentiated, the tendency is for reference points to converge around difference within social structural forces: "Gender, race and social class still determine children's trajectories [and] the family still acts as a powerful force" (Wyness, 2006, p.69). While theories of individualisation (discussed later in this chapter) are important in recognising the greater freedom of people to choose and create their own lifestyle, this should not be over-exaggerated (Miles, 2000): "…in modern society, neither structure, position, nor the individual, is the sole determinant of lifestyles. Modern lifestyles are the result of a complex interplay between phenomena of all three of these levels." (Johansson and Miegel, 1992, p.38; in Miles, 2000, p.66). Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990, in Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p.589) concept of 'habitus' is particularly useful here; habitus is:

> …a portfolio of dispositions to all aspects of life, largely tacitly held, which strongly influence actions in any situation – familiar or novel. The habitus is, in turn, influenced by who the person is and where in society they are positioned, as well as by their interactions with others. It is an embodiment of the complex amalgam of what some would call structural factors, such as social class, gender and ethnicity, together with a person's genetic inheritance, all of which continually influence and are influenced by others through interaction (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p.589).

This amalgam of structural forces continue to wield power over education and employment outcomes, yet 'blame' tends to fall on the individual for perpetuating the very social structures which influence them i.e. having low aspirations. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p.591) explain a young person's learning career is not predetermined, rather "oriented by the habitus of the individual and by the material and cultural contexts within which the habitus has developed and the person is located". They emphasise a combination of factors as contributing to life chances, rather than solely 'class' structures, as well as the active role of people themselves in creating society in combination with the traditional social structural forces at play (Steel and Kidd, 2001). Giddens (1984) explores this relationship further; structurational sociology explains the reflexive nature of humans in creating society through their actions with each other in day-to-day living. Their reality, as produced through action and structure, is then passed down to following generations as "a 'ready-made' reality, or in other words, as having the appearance of social structure, of a society 'out there'" (Steel and Kidd, 2001, p.167). In this way, action and structure are fundamentally related, and the reflexive nature of humans engaging with society reform it for themselves, as does the following generation etc. The following sections discuss the various factors interacting to influence aspirations.

2.6.1.1 Social class

"Social class is a widely used – but highly contested – concept…" (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.13) which, whilst not explicitly used in current policy, continues to be employed by a great number of contemporaries in the discipline of sociology. My research follows the approach of Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004) and Archer *et al.* (2005) who adopt a broader, more comprehensive notion of social class. Archer *et al.* (2005, p.13) recognise that class "may be grounded within and produced through people's identities and cultural practices, rather than just their occupational backgrounds". Social class is

> …not equal to education or to income or socio-economic status (SES). Elements of social class may include income, education, occupation and cultural capital, but even together these factors do not sum to social class… It exists in the distribution of assets and advantages across society and not at the level of the individual… (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004, p.15).

In recognition, social policy and sociological literature which use various terms to account for the traditional 'class system' (like social exclusion socio-economic status, occupational background, social class) will be discussed within the frameworks of Archer *et al.* (2005) and Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004).

Regardless of the economic climate experienced by any given youth cohort, the higher the parents' education and the higher status the father's occupation then, the higher the occupational aspirations and expectations of young people (DfES, 2007a; Andres *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, DfES (2006a) research states young people with parents in non-professional occupations are less likely to continue on to post-16 education than their peers with the same attainment level. Parental aspirations for their children tend to increase in line with the availability of economic resources to their family (Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007); yet parental aspirations are said to be more important to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schoon, Parsons and Sacker, 2004). Feinstein and Sabates (2006) found low maternal aspirations for children, shown in their low expectation for children to stay on at school, to be "one of the most predictive risk factors for the children suffering from multiple deprivation in adult life". Significantly, a recent report by DCFS (2008, p.24) suggests children from families in lower classes (determined by parental occupation) "tended to show a greater ambition to remain in education than their parents", with the greatest differences demonstrated by White and Black Caribbean young people. Differences between parental and youth attitudes to staying on may be, in part, due to the young people's awareness of the current labour market and the emphasis of education policy (via school experiences) upon staying on at

school post-16. As Robb *et al.* (2007, p.739) explain, this may reflect the position of young people living in

> …a late modern society characterised by wide ethnic diversity, less defined gender roles, a virtual absence of 'blue collar' jobs, rapid social and demographic change, and considerable geographical and social mobility… [whereby] educational choices (especially those made by 'non-traditional' students) become far more complex, and individuals are less likely to invoke strong class-based rejections of the value of extended education (Ball, Reay and David, 2002: De Silva, 2005; Furlong, 2004; Gunn, 2005; Modood, 2004, Reay, 2004a; Schoon and Parsons, 2002).

Even when young people from a working class background have higher educational aspirations, realising these aspirations can be more difficult than for their more advantaged peers (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Trusty, 2002). Gutman and Akerman (2008, p.17) warn, "young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to have to bring a little extra and do especially well in their exams in order to achieve". Despite this, Schoon (2006) believes aspirations for the future can buffer the negative impact of socioeconomic disadvantage upon young people.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001, p.205) identify a particular distinction between middle and working class contexts of choice; whereas working class aspirations focus strongly on the young person's own preferences and preservation of "social acceptability" (see working class parents' suggestion to learn a trade, in DCFS, 2008), middle class choice is strongly related to "networks of economic advancement and social status". This difference in aspirations is reflected in parents' "…capacity to fulfil such hopes, especially educational ones, relied on knowledge and resources that many parents lack" (Seaman *et al.*, 2006, p.1). Parents from higher social classes can fulfil such aspirations via "an extensive programme of work experience…often involving the parents of the pupils to provide access to hospitals, legal offices and accountancy practices" (Roker, 1991, p.9, in Novak 2002, p.66). The difference in the opportunities available mean "[y]oung people from more advantaged homes have greater access to material and financial resources" whilst "…role models, occupational knowledge, and informal kinship/social networks" may also explain this apparent aspirations gap (Schoon, 2006, in Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.11). It is important to note that social class does not straightforwardly determine outcomes for children and young people, but forms part of a web of influences shaping aspirations and outcomes.

Marjoribanks (2003) proposes a more complete aspiration-performance model to better understand the relationship between aspirations and academic outcomes. This model should account for

> …the potential interactions between aspirations and achievement and the possible differences in the interrelationships between the measures for students from different family backgrounds. Perhaps such a framework might be labelled as the 'aspiration x attainment x background' model to reflect the ongoing and different interactions between aspirations and academic outcomes for students from various family backgrounds (Marjoribanks, 2003, p.241).

In recognition of the difference in educational attainment of young people from different social class groups, education policy continues to target this gap (see discussion later in this chapter), now also attempting to account for the 'aspiration' element in Marjoribanks' (2003) model. However, such policy has been subject to criticism for its "normalising assumptions" about the young people it targets (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.9). Gewirtz (2000, p.365) describes recent policy as resocialising working class values to "universalise the values, attitudes and behaviour of a certain fraction of middle class parents". It is against these values, attitudes and behaviours, depicted as the norm, that others are judged as lacking (Archer *et al.*, 2005) i.e. aspirations to pursue higher education qualifications are the 'norm', anything less is a 'low' aspiration (deficit account of aspirations). It is paradoxical that the very inequalities in access (to resources; to cultural, social and economic capital etc) created by social class and viewed as contributing to disparity in educational attainment are the same characteristics which recent educational policy seek to normalise and expect all parents to provide for their children to succeed.

In this sense, it is questionable whether 'staying on' or leaving school is an active, conscious, rational choice made by young people;

> staying on may be automatic for the middle classes, whereas leaving or 'choosing something else' may be 'natural' and common-sense for working class groups… differential positions in relation to 'risk'/privilege may constrain and shape the options and 'choices' that are possible and thinkable (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.54).

Goldthorpe (1996) warns that youth aspirations should be assessed by relative, not absolute, standards; any decision made by lower social class students to stay on or leave education is judged, in part, in terms of their likelihood of success (in Andres *et al.*, 1999). Citing Goldthorpe (1996), Andres *et al.* (1999, p.264) explain,

> …it need not be supposed that the tendency of children from working class families to pursue in general less ambitious educational careers than children from service-class families derives a 'poverty' of aspiration … in pursuing any

given goal from different class origins, different 'social distances' will have to be traversed.

Here, young people are not viewed as solely at the mercy of their social class origins, but recognised as actively employing a cost-benefit analysis of their educational careers. By the same token, they are described as 'knowing their limits', and understand their horizons of action as being "bounded by dense, impermeable limits, which [are] constructed through a complex interplay of social identities and inequalities of 'race', class and gender." (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.67). Young people from higher income families might set a higher floor for acceptable career choices, whilst young people from lower income families may experience a ceiling to their aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Policy and media discourses[2] continue to define what is normal and desirable in terms of aspirations for education and employment (see Moreau, 2011), including the 'lens' through which we judge success and failure. However, social class is one of a number of social structural influences shaping young people's developing aspirations; the following section examines the impact of gender upon young people's aspirations.

2.6.1.2 Gender

The influence of gender upon aspirations for education and employment is observed via a normative model of what it means to be 'male' and 'female' (Gottfredson, 2002), and the associated assumptions regarding appropriate gender roles. For example, Thomson and Holland's (2002, p.341) research found "almost all of the young people expected to be married or in a steady live-in relationship and with children by the age of 35, most expecting marriage". Some research indicates that girls and boys have similar levels of aspiration (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Mau and Bikos, 2000; Farmer, 1997), yet more recent research suggests much greater gender differences, with 77% of boys compared with 88% of girls intending to continue in full time education (Strand, 2007). Indeed, girls are more likely than boys to want to continue with full-time study whilst boys are more likely to want a full-time job (Willitts *et al.*, 2005). The lower aspirations of girls observed in studies from 10 to 20 years ago have risen in response to the increase in participation of women in the labour force and shifts in beliefs about gender roles and

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[2] Following Moreau (2011, p.163), I am using the definition of discourse as "a set of social practices which shape the objects of which it speaks, rather than just describing these.".

paid work (Andres *et al.*, 1999).[3] Francis *et al.* (2003) suggest girls are more educationally ambitious and focused today than twenty years ago, with the majority of their sample aspiring to a professional career, which would traditionally be performed by men. Girls are more likely than boys to say they plan to stay on at school beyond the compulsory school leaving age and to be considering going on to university (Keys, 2006). Epstein *et al.* (1998) suggest these higher educational aspirations, in addition to the removal of previous barriers to educational success for girls, have combined to produce high levels of achievement amongst female pupils. This may be explained in part by the findings of Warrington, Younger and Williams (2000, p.401) who identified "a common pattern of most girls, at least by year 10, realising the value of achieving as good a set of GCSE grades as possible and focusing quite seriously on this goal and beyond." Other research suggests this difference in attitude to education and approach to their future may be due to a gender bias in their self-evaluations, where "girls have a lower estimation of their abilities than boys" (Sullivan, 2006, p.280).

By the age of 13, young people have often dismissed a number of occupations because they are the wrong sex-type, beyond their capabilities or at a too high/low level, thus foreclosing their potential "by limiting their experiences and educational choices" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.5). For example, in Archer *et al.*'s (2005) study, the most frequently mentioned aspirations amongst girls (60%) were hair/beauty and care work (like nursing and childcare), whereas most boys (67%) aspired to manual trades (like plumbing and mechanics). In this case, traditional discourses of femininity motivate young working class women to aspire to particular occupations:

> The tendency for girls to follow paths into caring or hair and beauty industries clearly reflected traditional discourses around (working class) femininities, that associate femininity with altruism, care of others and appearance… For the girls who wanted to be beauticians or hairdressers, and work in clothes shops, their motivations also reflected their own interest (and competencies) in relation to feminine discourses around appearance… (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.131).

Gendered aspirations are affected by role models within the family; for example, daughters with mothers who are career-oriented or employed in non-traditional, professional careers will develop less traditional attitudes towards family and career, which results in them feeling less conflicted about adulthood and becoming an independent woman (Fiebig, 2003). Other writers describe the influence of parental

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[3] Although this is not indicative of the difficulty young women face in converting their educational capital in the labour market or that their employment is "…characterised by higher levels of precarity and lower levels of pay and responsibility." (Moreau, 2011, p165).

education upon children's occupational aspirations, which are sensitive to same parent-child gender; father's education has a significant effect on young male aspirations, while mother's education has a significant effect on the aspirations of daughters (Andres *et al.*, 1999). Generally, parental socioeconomic status influences both male and female educational aspirations, although there are notable differences related to family composition, where "…the experience of living with a single parent positively affects the aspirations of girls but not boys", which is partly due to the experiences of girls living with their single mother whereby they need to be "more attuned to [the] high educational aspirations necessary for financial independence in the future." (Kao and Tienda, 1998, p.375, p.379). Here a mix of deeply entrenched gender roles and the late modern concept of individualization combine to create a situation in which young females must hold high educational aspirations, obtain good, high status qualifications, attain and maintain a professional occupation, while pursuing the expected traditional aspiration of husband and children.

Researchers in the field emphasise that it is not the level of aspiration expressed by young people that is relevant, rather the difference evident between males and females in realising these aspirations (Shapka *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, young men realise the aspirations of the normative model more easily than their female counterparts, for whom "severe tensions exist between these expectations of relationships, and high educational and occupational aspirations" (Thomson and Holland, 2002, p.341). While young people continue to find it difficult to imagine a future outside of this normative model (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002), young women will continue to experience difficulty in realising both their aspirations for a relationship and those for education and a career. Some young men in Henderson *et al.*'s (2007, p.149) study expected women to fulfil 'traditional' roles or "to combine these with new ones, thus both perpetuating and remaking inequalities". Thomson and Holland (2002, p.348) highlight "the growing disjuncture between a gendered reality and a discourse of individual choice"; this may create a situation within which young women are told they have more freedom to choose, that they can 'have it all' by combining family and work commitments, while in reality traditional gender identities continue to influence the opportunities available to young men and women. One major criticism directed at the educational and occupational reforms of more recent times is their encouragement of young women to aspire to "unfettered careers" without giving due attention within educational discourses about "the contradictory labour market and family contexts" in which these young women must then live (McLaren, 1996, in Andres *et al.*, 1999, p.276). This almost unquestioned acceptance of individualised contexts of choice for young women today does not

acknowledge the limits within which the individual must carry out decisions, choices and actions (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002).

Whilst there have been shifts in girls' aspirations and expectations since key works in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, McRobbie and Garber, 1976; McRobbie, 1978; Griffin, 1985), "working-class young women continue to leave school earlier, and with fewer qualifications, than their middle-class female peers" (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007, p.166). The horizons of choice for working-class girls are structured around leaving school at 16, expecting to work locally, and having a heterosexual relationship, with child-bearing following; this 'hyper-heterosexual female habitus', structured and reinforced by locality and social interrelationships, prevents working-class girls from aspiring to or expecting anything beyond their local context (Connolly and Healy, 2004). Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth (2007, p.166) suggest that performance of this hyper-heterosexualised femininity is "one of the most popular ways of 'doing girl' among both working-class and middle-class girls". This performance mainly relied on girls making a substantial investment in their appearance in order to look glamorous, desirable and heterosexual, which, 'if successful', would bring peer status and approval (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007). This process of 'doing girl' rejects any traditional notions of children being passive recipients in their own lives, showing them to engage in a complex manipulation of "classed, gendered and racialised symbols" to create a hyper-heterosexual femininity which surpass the margins of ethnicity, social class and space (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007, p.169). In this way, young women are able to realise a sense of power and agency in their performances (Hey, 1997).

2.6.1.3 Ethnicity and faith

Discussion of gender and its impact upon aspirations has illustrated the significance of identity to understanding the development of aspirations; literature on ethnicity and faith/religion also highlights the influence of identity upon young people's experiences at home, school and their locality. Kanno (2003, p.3, in Creese *et al.*, 2006, p.27) describes identity as "our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world". Identity is socially constructed "… at the interface between age, race, class, ethnicity, gender, generation, sexual orientation, location and social status, and [is] often fragmented, hybrid, de-centred, multiple and shifting" (Creese *et al.*, 2006, p.28). My reference here to both ethnicity and faith recognises that individuals may identify with different groups in different contexts. Ethnic and religious identities are closely linked, with "[e]thnic identity

defined by nationality or race [...] often substituted with an ethnic identity defined by religious affiliation…" (Cassidy, O'Connor and Dorrer, 2006, p.44-45). Ethnicity represents a variety of different meanings; it can be used, for example, as "a marker of national belonging, of 'culture', of country of birth, or language spoken…" (Allard and Santoro, 2006, p.119). My discussion around faith and ethnicity refers to a sense of belonging for its members, which has been associated with positive self-concepts; for example, belonging to an ethnic or faith group can bring "social status or collective self-worth", which has been related to "personal psychological resources such as self-esteem" (Muldoon, 2003, p.200). Henderson *et al.* (2007, p.112) describe the wider benefits of this collective belonging, which develops a sense of place for its members, implying "connectedness and relationships with others, saying something about inclusion, acceptance, and identity…".

In this section, I discuss literature which links such a sense of belonging with a young person's developing aspirations. In my study, all participants were born in the UK; five would describe themselves as White British and one as Traveller. There is a great volume of literature examining the role of ethnicity upon young people's aspirations for education and employment (Kirton, 2009; Strand, 2007; Cassidy, O'Connor and Dorrer, 2006; McLaughlin, Trew and Muldoon, 2006; Nayak, 2003; Rutherford, Wager and Netto, 2003; Ball, Reay and David, 2002), but a limited body of evidence focusing specifically on Gypsy/Traveller youths and their aspirations for education and employment (perhaps partly due to the fact it is only more recently that Gypsy/Travellers have been recognised as an ethnic group[4]). Reflecting the ethnicity of the young people participating in this research study, discussion of ethnicity will primarily focus on generic influences of ethnic status upon young people's aspirations, with specific examples from young people of Gypsy/Traveller origins.

Strand (2007) found White British parents had the lowest aspirations for their children than any other group, with 77% expecting their child to stay in full time education after compulsory schooling compared with over 90% of minority ethnic parents. In the UK, young people from minority ethnic groups demonstrated high aspirations at any given point, but were "less likely to maintain high aspirations throughout high school", which is attributed to "differential family resources" (Kao and Tienda, 1998, p.372). Children of

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[4] Previously the 1968 Caravan Sites Act defined Gypsy/Travellers as 'persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin' (Kiddle, 2000), which also included New Age Travellers, denying Gypsy/Travellers their ethnic heritage. A Court of Appeal judgement (CRE v Dutton) in 1988 finally confirmed Gypsy/Travellers as 'a racial group' as defined by the 1976 Race Relations Act (Kiddle, 2000).

minority groups may be further disadvantaged by a lack of understanding in the school environment, which may not acknowledge competing cultural norms and values – those of the majority group, practiced by staff and pupils alike, and those of their own heritage (Derrington and Kendall, 2004). This ethnocentric school culture often fails to recognise the ability of minority youth to successfully operate in both cultural contexts, dealing with sometimes conflicting cultural norms and expectations. Katz (2002, p.4) found young people from ethnic minority groups "…had a negative outlook on access to help and advice, chances of success and their ability to cope independently". Young people's lack of hope has strong repercussions and can lead to a loss of sense of belonging and of feeling valued.

For young Travellers, education policy which is focused upon meeting targets and publishing league tables "has resulted in an increased reluctance to accept the enrolment of Traveller children (ACERT, 1998; NATT, 1999, in Jordan, 2001, p.59). If successfully enrolled, schools would verbalize that they understood Gypsy/Traveller aspirations as different to the majority youth, yet acknowledgment of their aspirations for independence, early marriage and family responsibility did not transpire into support in school for these cultural norms and values (Jordan, 2001, p.66). To some degree, it is difficult to see the relevance of secondary school education within Traveller children's lives, "in particular the implicit goals of schooling, both social and scholastic, and the intangible deferred rewards of academic achievement for a community with no history of need for engagement in such a process" (Jordan, 2001, p.66). It is this lack of relevance, along with bullying, which Gypsy Traveller parents cite as the basis of their reluctance to send their children to secondary school (DfES, 2006b). If schools are to be fully inclusive, they must recognise the ethnocentrism which permeates education policy and practice; they can then "encourage all students to achieve without stereotyping or pathologising their behaviour [because it] is inconsistent with sanctioned dominant culture" (Yeh and Drost, 2002, in Derrington and Kendall, 2004, p.180). Traveller children in Northumberland suggested this could be achieved by employing teachers who "…know more about the travelling life and are very understanding" (Young Travellers Action Research Team, 2002, p.39).

Some minority youth opt to hide their ethnic or cultural identity to gain acceptance from the dominant group members; this is referred to as 'passing' (Acton, 1974; Tajfel, 1978) and is described as a fairly common response by Gypsy/Travellers (Lee, 1993; Hancock, 1997). For some young people of minority ethnic heritage, "hearing the constant denigration of their culture has led to an extremely poor self-image and a lack of self-

esteem" and has a significant impact upon developing aspirations (Kiddle, 2000, p.128). Derrington and Kendall (2004, p.179) illustrate the effects of positive attitudes towards ethnic identity upon the retention of Gypsy/Traveller students in secondary school; more than half of those who completed Key Stage 3 were open about their ethnicity with staff and pupils, making no attempt to disguise their cultural heritage: "This apparent 'sense of belonging' to two cultures, without compromising one's own sense of cultural and familial identity, reflects a secure sense of cultural identity". Some young people will be supported by their families in this process, reflecting a shift in traditional cultural attitudes and expectations within some Gypsy/Traveller communities: "Traveller communities could no longer rely on traditional patterns of employment. Just over a third of the mothers expressed hopes and aspirations for their children which challenged or diverged from traditional norms." (Derrington and Kendall, 2004, p.175). It is clear Traveller communities, as much as any other population in recent times, have been affected by changes to industry and employment, and must adapt and respond accordingly; this in turn influences expectations of young people and the occupations they pursue. In Derrington and Kendall's (2004, p.116) sample, of the students who successfully completed Key Stage 3, their parents gave responses which challenged traditional cultural norms and their children then "echoed their parents' expectations".

Faith/religion also contributes to young people's sense of who they are, their family origins, and what are appropriate educational/employment pathways for them to follow. Young people practice religion in a wider sense; rather than a "fixed or static" religious identity, young people "shift from personal to collective, theological to cultural religious identities… religious identities for these young people are about more than purely religious issues such as theology and religious practice" (McLaughlin, Trew and Muldoon, 2006, p.612). Cassidy, O'Connor and Dorrer (2006, p.44) found religion played a greater part in the lives of minority ethnic young people in the UK than their white counterparts with regards to the way in which they defined themselves as a person; irrespective of ethnicity, their explanations regarding the importance of religion were not qualitatively different, with all participants who rated religious identity as important describing religion as "a way of life', 'who you are' and a means of being 'a good person', 'something to turn to', or a connection with family, the local or global community". Religious identity can give young people a sense of belonging and purpose, with religion being described as "a guide or map for life", informing young people's choices and decisions about their future (McLaughlin, Trew and Muldoon, 2006, p.607). For young people, investing in a religious identity "not only defines their cultural and

ethnic heritage in the present, but constitutes a down payment that potentially allows them to capitalise on in the future." *(*Henderson *et al.*, 2007*,* p.122).

2.6.2 Influencing aspirations: Mediating/Connecting factors

2.6.2.1 Locality/place

Place is described as a mediator of social structures upon young people's identity and aspirations (Nayak, 2003), with working class constructions of identity "bound up with locale" (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.16). Such locale-based identities influenced university choices, with differences observed by social class, where "only working class students talked in terms of geographical constraints" regarding decisions about higher education (Reay, 1998, p.523). This was also reflected in Craddock *et al.*'s (2007, p.22) research, whereby teaching staff suggested many young people from the North East who did proceed to higher education would do so locally in order to remain in an area they were familiar with and to stay close to family and friends. Similarly, students in Archer and Yamashita's (2003b, p.66) study wanted to stay in the local area due to family relations and a sense of security and familiarity. In this way "…local networks may act as a two-edged sword, providing community and belonging yet also tying young people into identities and practices that are at odds with educational achievement" (Henderson *et al.* 2007, p.106).

While recognising the effects of place upon young people's aspirations, Furlong and Cartmel (1994, p.21) argue this is intersected by social class, whereby the range of opportunities in an area and its social composition mean that "…areas with few opportunities tend to be working class areas." MacDonald and Marsh (2005, p.143) elaborate on the relationship between social class, place and developing aspirations:

> …local cultural knowledge and values bound individual choices and actions. It is at the local level that young people learn informally – particularly from friends and family and through their own lived experience 'a sense of future possibilities' … it is at this level that they learn how such knowledge fits (or does not) the formal 'structure of opportunities' offered to young people through education, training and employment.

Henderson *et al.* (2007, p.106) suggest an alternative picture of the young person as accessing and moving amongst "different economies of mobility" as they grow older, becoming more aware of how their own locality "fits within a wider picture" and using "whatever resources they are able to access" in order to realise their aspirations.

Nayak's (2003) ethnographic research with young people in the North East of England reasserts the value of place, arguing that the everyday lived realities of youth are far more place-bound than postmodern theory would suggest. For example, the relationship between local labour market opportunities, the value young people place upon continued education and subsequent occupational aspirations: "…any judgements they make about the value of continued education need to be understood in relation to their occupational aspirations which are effected by their perceptions of their ability as well as by their knowledge of the sorts of occupations available in the local labour market." (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994, p.9). This reflects the active role of young people who are engaged in a reflexive process, assessing the opportunities available in their locality, taking into consideration their own skills and competencies, and forming appropriate aspirations for education and employment. Craddock *et al.* (2007, p.22) describe two cases in which staff working in schools in rural locations felt the shortage of employment opportunities in the local area had an impact upon students' aspirations for future education and employment. Urban youth "with access and exposure to more occupational and educational opportunities" tend to aim higher than their rural counterparts (Andres *et al.*, 1999, p.262). Similarly, it is important to recognise the complexities involved in forming young people's aspirations, where place is one of a variety of factors which interplay to influence their hopes and plans for the future.

2.6.2.2 *Social capital*

The notion of social capital has become important in British policy generally and particularly over the last decade (DCLG, 2006; DCLG, 2007; DfES, 2004); being broadly recognised as "social networks and norms of trust and reciprocity", social capital is considered to be "a desirable characteristic of communities and societies and as a valuable asset for individuals, enabling access through social networks to employment, skills, health, and other individual benefits" (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.1-2). Social capital, or the 'social glue' which makes society work (Schmuecker, 2008), is valued as a way in which to achieve educational and wider outcomes as well as a valuable outcome in itself (Stevens *et al.*, 2007).

Whilst all three types of social capital[5] are considered a valuable resource, the degree to which one holds one type over another (i.e. bonding exclusive of bridging) can carry

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[5] There are three types of social capital: bonding social capital where networks are comprised of people who are similar to one another; bridging social capital refers to looser, horizontal networks of people from different backgrounds (e.g. cultural, ethnic, social); and linking social capital, which includes

negative implications. For example, bridging social capital is generally considered to be good, being linked to shorter periods of unemployment and raised expectations and aspirations due to people associating with more diverse networks; bonding social capital reinforces "the confidence and homogeneity of a particular group", can encourage exclusivity (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.3) and "negative behaviours through social pressure" (Schmuecker, 2008:4). My research will follow the lead of Stevens *et al.* (2007, p.7), whose focus on the resources of social capital combines the work of Bourdieu (1999) and Putnam (2000, 1995):

> …the emphasis is on the resources that can be acquired through networks…we define social capital as social relationships between actors (individuals, groups, organisations) through which particular resources can be acquired…[furthermore] relationships can exist between members of particular in-group (bonding social capital) or between members of in- and out-groups (bridging social capital).

Members of lower social class groups usually have higher levels of bonding social capital, through which they use their networks as a protective factor; they also tend to have lower levels of bridging and linking social capital compared with members of higher social class groups, which translates into limited access to 'productive' resources (Ball, 2003). Young people with different family backgrounds hold "networks of relationships that are differentially 'converted into socially valued resources and opportunities'…" (Stantonj-Salazar, 1997, p.8, in Marjoribanks, 2002, p.35). In terms of developing and realising aspirations for the future, people with more education have wider social networks (i.e. greater bridging social capital), resulting in "more resourceful connections that can help them to 'push forward' in life" (Di Maggio, 2001, p.548).

Recent research by Schmuecker (2008) has identified a higher level of bonding social capital in the North East region. Regular contact with family and neighbours is evidence of the strong communities and social cohesion government policy is aspiring to; yet, higher levels of bonding social capital are felt to "signify exclusive and inward looking communities and a low level of geographic mobility" which, together with the statistics suggesting North Easterners are much less likely to have friends from different ethnic backgrounds (32% compared with the England and Wales average of 50%), might indicate "weaker bridging capital in the region" (Schmuecker, 2008, p.7). It is bridging social capital which plays a particularly important role in raising young people's aspirations as "more extensive networks bring people from different backgrounds together, exposing individuals to a wider range of information and different ways of doing

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connections with people and institutions holding different levels of power/authority (e.g. staff-student relationship in school) (Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007).

things" (Schmuecker, 2008, p.16). Young people's social networks are made up of a range of actors, including family members, peers at school and from their neighbourhood, and school staff (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.4). Not only are these networks likely to interact, the degree to which they affect young people's outcomes differs; for some young people "social networks, norms and values in family settings will be aligned with those in school settings, while for other young people these will be in tension" (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.4). Being exposed to new, varied experiences, perhaps to individuals with high aspirations, could encourage and inspire young people and raise their aspirations, "making activities that might otherwise seem out if reach appear more possible" (Schmuecker, 2008, p.16). Whilst research has shown this does occur (Halpern, 2005), other research suggests more deeply entrenched ideas about the value and trustworthiness of sources of information and support which may make the development and benefits of bridging social capital difficult to realise. For example, young working class people preferred 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) from family and friends, which limited their horizons and stifled their aspirations as they did not have sufficient knowledge or understanding of the education system (Archer *et al.*, 2005).

2.6.2.3 Learner identity

Weil (1986, in Rees *et al.*, 2006, p.932) describes learner identity as "the emergence of values and beliefs about learning, schooling and knowledge… incorporat[ing] personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning as integrated over time". The formation of learner identity involves a complex range of potential influencers, including individual characteristics, relationships with significant others and institutions, structural forces (e.g. social class), and their locality (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Experiences of schooling are considered particularly influential in forming a young person's learner identity, with positive school experiences being associated with the development of a positive learner identity (Raphael Reed, Gates and Last, 2007; Rees *et al.*, 2006). Negative school experiences affecting learner identity could include the process of being labelled by staff, peers etc as 'deviant' (Skopalová, 2010). When a young person is labelled, they lose face and experience embarrassment, shame, or humiliation (Scheff, 2010, no page number).

> The essence of labelling is thus describing an individual's behaviour as inappropriate *regardless of whether any norms have been broken*. […] The individual then creates a negative image of her/himself, especially as a

consequence of being repeatedly negatively defined by other... (Skopalová, 2010, p.330) (own italics).

Once a young person is labelled (as truant or troublemaker, for example), other people (e.g. teachers, peers) start to respond to them in accordance with their assigned label. The young person may then accept the label, identify with it, and behave according to the ascribed label *(*Skopalová, 2010). It becomes increasingly difficult for the young person "to behave in any other way than that which they feel is expected of them" (Skopalová, 2010, p.334).

Generally young people's aspirations are raised when their academic performance is good (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Academic self-concept (one's perceived academic abilities) accounted for

> …a significant proportion of the variance in the aspirations of year 7 and year 9 pupils attending five inner-city comprehensive secondary schools in Britain… The high aspirations of Black African and Asian groups were explained, in part, by a strong academic self-concept, whereas the low aspirations of White British pupils related to a generally poor academic self-concept (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.13).

Aspirations are shaped by a young person's perception of themselves and of their abilities; their perceived self-efficacy is crucial in shaping their aspirations in addition to their commitment to pursuing them. Self-efficacy is a belief in the ability of one's actions to produce effects; a young person's

> …efficacy expectations are the major determinant of goal setting, activity choice, willingness to expend effort and persistence. Perceived self-efficacy is determined by previous performance, vicarious learning, verbal encouragement by others and one's own psychological reactions (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004, p.52-53).

In this sense, if a young person believes in their own ability to pursue a particular goal successfully, this "fosters aspirations to achieve, even in the face of setbacks and difficulties" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.13). However, perceptions of ability are cut through by social structures; for example, "…students from higher SES backgrounds show, on average, higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-concept of ability … [whilst] girls have lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy than boys" (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.94). Young people's experiences during Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14) "are critical to the likelihood of them progressing to HE… by the time they reach 14 years of age their learning identities and trajectories have already been powerfully formed" (Raphael Reed, Gates and Last, 2007, p.32). This is not to say that learner identities are fixed; rather

people can change their views and understanding of themselves, "but only in as far as their structural and cultural circumstances allow" (Swain, 2007, p.94-95, in Dodgson *et al.*, 2008, p.11). Being constructed and reconstructed in this way, responding to learning experiences, makes learner identities "highly individualistic" (Waller, 2004, p.38, in Dodgson *et al.*, 2008, p.11).

2.7 The interplay of structures and agency: the role of aspirations in framing transitions

Within this section, discussion will examine the interplay of influencers upon youth aspirations, with specific consideration of family, peer group and school (including teaching and support staff), alongside the agency of young people.

2.7.1 The family

Parents are "the strongest shapers" of young people's aspirations through the "encouragement and expectation they communicate" to the young person (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002, p.101). Family relationships are more important to and more influential upon aspirations for education and upon wider outcomes than other relationships with peers and school staff (Stevens *et al.*, 2007; Archer *et al.*, 2005). The role of discussion between family members is emphasised as significant in this process (Archer *et al.*, 2005) as well as the family relationships being supportive and close (Stevens *et al.*, 2007). Parents' own experience of education also has an impact upon their children's participation in education; if either parent left school before 15 years old, this has a negative effect upon the likelihood of their child staying on in school beyond the compulsory leaving age (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004). Craddock *et al.* (2007, p.20) explored parents' educational experiences further, finding "negative attitudes of parents towards education often leads to a lack of motivation in young people". It is important to note that young people's aspirations are affected by parental education and employment as a result of wider factors influencing access to opportunities and resources; young people in particular localities "were not used to seeing their parents in employment because of the relatively high levels of unemployment that continued to characterize the area" in which they lived (Craddock *et al.*, 2007, p.20). The combined effects of social class and location also inform parental experiences and attitudes to education, contributing to the type of family role model available to young people.

The choice-making processes undertaken by families around primary to secondary transitions can be distinguished by social class:

> …the majority of middle-class families (in their sample) 'guide' and 'channel' choice-making, ruling some options out and gently positioning other choices as real alternatives. Working-class families and indeed, recently arrived immigrant families may ascribe a greater degree of educational expertise to their children who know more than they do about the educational system and who, after all, have to live with any decision (Reay and Ball, 1998, in Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.97).

In terms of what is expected within the family, siblings are particularly significant as role models in this respect; for example, Katz's (2002, p.12) found that where older brothers or sisters "paved the way and stayed in education, the siblings followed". Participants in Robb *et al.*'s (2007, p.746) study described close relationships with siblings, in which they shared interests, ambitions and values together; where these older siblings were particularly successful academically or professionally, they acted as significant role models. Siblings "…could inform about certain jobs, advise on sectors in which there are job opportunities, on what grades are needed when aspiring to certain careers, on how to get college and university prospectuses and how to apply" (Rutherford, Wager and Netto, 2003, p.22). Even where young people are able to draw upon the encouragement of family role models, young people's "…feelings of 'not being worth it', combined with institutional effects *…* [and] acted in opposition to these sources of support… [In short] pupils' aspirations were constantly circumscribed by social and economic risks and constraints" (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.65-6). Young people are seen to be taking into account their immediate sources of support, their own experiences of education and their learner identity, with an awareness of their locality and the opportunities available to them; this reflexive process shapes their developing aspirations and choices about education and employment.

2.7.2   Peer group

Whilst research has shown the family to be particularly significant in shaping young people's aspirations, the peer group also plays an important role. There is some conflict of opinion regarding the role and influence of peers upon youth aspirations, with some authors describing their influence as peripheral and others suggesting their effect is of wider importance than initially recognised; my research reflects the peripheral influence of peer groups upon young people and their aspirations as the peer group was not found

to be a significant influence for the young women participating, therefore I limit my discussion here but acknowledge the alternative findings of other research in the field.

Young people themselves describe their peer group as important in their lives generally (Robb *et al.*, 2007) but may not recognise the influence of peers upon their attitudes and decisions regarding education (Craddock *et al.*, 2007).

> Friends shaped and validated each other's attitudes, values and self-image; they helped each other stay on course academically; they discussed and planned their future. The acceptance, admiration and respect of friends and peers was a major boost to confidence and self-image (Robb *et al.*, 2007, p.747).

Nurmi (2004, in Kiuru *et al.* 2007, p.996) describes the peer group as a natural context in which young people can think about the future, enabling them to discuss future-related decisions with friends and act as an important source of information about future prospects. Young people may choose to "model their peers' decisions concerning future education", particularly if they are not sure of their own plans (Kiuru *et al.*, 20007, p.996).

In pursuing friendships which reflect their own values, interests and attitudes, peers can reinforce one another's existing perceptions and choices (Kiuru *et al.*, 2007), whereby it is difficult to say they actively inform each others' attitudes and decision-making about education, as opposed to reinforcing existing tendencies. Regarding the role of peer groups within the process of identity formation, Robb *et al.* (2007, p.750) suggest that "…academically successful students are not passive recipients of whatever peer pressure surrounds them, but active seekers of the sorts of friends and role models who will affirm their developing identity and provide the support and stimulation they need". Overall, the influence of peer groups upon developing aspirations is less clear-cut than that of parental influence.

2.7.3   The school

Buchmann and Dalton (2002, p.99-100) suggest "the effects of interpersonal influences on educational aspirations depend, in part, on the institutional contexts in which they function". The school acts as a filter for educational aspirations, a site in which the young person brings personal experiences and family background together with peer group relationships to influence and be influenced by the school type and composition (i.e. 2 or 3-tier, state/public, single/mixed sex, faith/secular), teaching staff and educational policy (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002). Teachers were identified as "critical influences", whether

as a source of motivation and encouragement "when they were seen to know and care about pupils", or as a source of demotivation "when teachers were thought to be temporary or 'not bothered'" (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.65). There is an association between positive student attitudes to education and teachers having high expectations, offering praise and giving regular feedback to students (Keys and Fernandes, 1995). Participants in Archer and Yamashita's (2003a, p.66) study reported students' reliance upon teachers in interpreting careers information and guiding their aspirations; in situations where young people had no idea of what to do in terms of post-compulsory education routes, they were open to the suggestions made to them by teachers. This may be particularly true for young people without role models at home, for example no older siblings or parents without employment, for whom teachers offer insight into opportunities beyond students' personal experiences.

Research has shown that "teachers' assessments of children's abilities can be affected by the non-academic characteristics of students such as gender, ethnicity, social class, perceived character and physical attractiveness" (Sullivan, 2006, p.284) and teachers' "differential treatment of pupils from different backgrounds can also have a detrimental effect in pupils' achievement and engagement with school" (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.12). Whilst teachers' lower expectations of working class students are linked with their lower educational achievement (Archer *et al.*, 2005), high teacher expectations are described as a key determinant of effectiveness and pupil progress (Sammons, 1999). Lupton (2004, p.25) points to the subjectivity of teaching practices, which are "…underpinned by subjective judgements of pupils' and parents' behavioural norms, cultures and attitudes…[and] informed by the teachers' own social class, ethnic origin and educational and professional socialisation".

Teachers' presumptions about young people and their treatment of students inform the type of support they receive to achieve educational goals and the direction in which they are advised to go, "with the less academic students seemingly receiving more social, emotional support and the more school-oriented students more academic support" (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.78). Furlong (2004, in Robb *et al.*, 2007, p.751), explains "teachers are often very willing to put in extra input to children from poor backgrounds whom they see as 'high fliers' but that similar support is rarely offered to students considered to be of average or low ability". Students are aware of teachers' treatment of students based on ability, with the majority of young people in Craddock *et al.*'s (2007) study stating that only 'clever' students were praised 'most of the time' or 'sometimes'. It is important, however, to attribute some of teachers' ability-based behaviour towards

students' on the impact of education policy upon practice. Stevens *et al.* (2007, p.77) describe this as the 'educational triage' effect (see Gillborn and Youdell, 2000), resulting from the marketisation of education. Despite the highly publicised Every Child Matters agenda, "…raising educational outcomes is still considered a more important work objective than realising other valued goals, related to students' happiness, well-being and community cohesion" (Stevens *et al.*, 2007, p.79).

Providing new role models to raise young people's aspirations is also stipulated in a number of recent government strategies, including Aiming High for Young People (DCSF, 2007a) and the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007c). Giving young people the opportunity to work with accessible others, someone to guide their thinking, a mentor, can be "fundamental to changed orientations and opinions about what was possible" both in school and beyond (Raffo, 2006, p.86). The key to young people's engagement with mentors was their ability to relate to young people; this reflected their recruitment from local communities, whereby "They spoke a language that could be easily referenced by the young people and this language communicated a sense of place and who they were, things with which the people could connect…" (Raffo, 2006, p.87). A professional who shares a sense of place, a history, 'sameness', shared values and behavioural norms is able to connect with young people, build their confidence, inform their aspirations and act as a role model: "This mutuality provided the young people with a confidence that they, themselves, could in fact work in these types of sectors", not confine themselves to the sectors traditionally expected of them and accepted by them (Raffo, 2006, p.87).

2.7.4   The young person

Having discussed the range of external influencers upon aspirations, I now examine the active role of the young person in developing and pursuing aspirations for education and employment. The critical practice of postmodernism has "given way to a greater recognition of difference and the ways in which gender, ethnicity and sexualities intersect with, and so complicates, modern beliefs in truth, knowledge and experience" (Nayak, 2003, p.31). A development of postmodernity is 'reflexive modernization' (Giddens, 1991) where being more knowledgeable and critical, or 'reflexive' (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), involves demonstration of increased reflection, self-awareness and agency (Steel and Kidd, 2001). Reflexivity is important to identity-formation, whereby "conventional (modernist) social frames of reference are weakened" and external collective influences

(including social class, gender, family etc) "…no longer provide unambiguous building blocks and life trajectories in the structuring of who we are." (Wyness, 2006, p.52). Transitions to adulthood are now more open to alternatives through reflexivity and individual agency, so young people's aspirations can depart from traditional expectations based in social structures.

Young people are reflexive, monitoring and negotiating their aspirations and the opportunities available to them over time (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). The young person assesses "…potential costs and benefits of a given educational path […] the means by which the various routes can be pursued, and [having] some degree of knowledgeability about the outcomes of a given destination…" (Goldthorpe, 1996, in Andres *et al.*. 1999, p.264). Young people are thus able to assess their own position and make rational decisions on this basis. They actively construct their aspirations, reflecting on the local labour market as well as judging their own academic abilities (academic self-concept), assessing which jobs are beyond their reach or too low in status for them to pursue; weighing up their own abilities against local opportunities in this way affects their planned routes through education to the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994). However, repeated disappointments for the young person can lead to lowered expectations, disillusionment and potentially disengagement (Cieslik and Simpson, 2006). Anderson *et al.* (2002) found that failure to achieve a particular ambition did not affect future ambitions per say, but did limit young people's willingness to plan for the future.

Although family attitudes and values are a persistent influential feature in young people's lives, their choices and decision-making are regarded as a fusion of these inherited values and their own emerging individual values (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). However, there are degrees to which particular groups are able to exercise such agency; people are able "to choose *inside the boundaries* of the system of available options" (Boh, 1989, in Cheal, 1999, p.66) (my italics), which are dependent upon the traditional social structural forces of modern society (class, gender, ethnicity etc) (Smart and Neale, 1999, in Allan and Crow, 2001). Evans *et al.* (2001, p.24, p.25, in MacDonald and Marsh 2005, p.142) refer to 'bounded agency'; the young person has "…structurally rooted, 'subjectively perceived frames for action and decision'", whereby their agency is "…'temporally embedded and bounded, influenced by the chances of the present moment, by past experiences and the sense of future possibilities'.". Therefore some individuals are better placed to achieve their aspirations and fulfil their needs than others. In which case, "the growing stress on individual projects and the idea of the individual as the yardstick against which all projects and programmes are judged" (Morgan, 1999,

p.23) can be detrimental if the individual cannot perform reflexively or access resources to achieve their aspirations i.e. the individual is responsible for failing to achieve.

This active reflexivity amongst young people questions the common assumptions made about lower aspirations among youth today. The evidence highlights a disjuncture which renders life chances as highly structured, yet solutions for which are sought on an individual basis (Andres *et al.*, 1999). When young people were asked what would help them to achieve their future ambitions, they "…focused most frequently on individual effort (e.g. 'it's largely down to me', 'work hard', 'concentrate and study', 'determination')…" (Cassidy, O'Connor and Dorrer*,* 2006, p.17). In this sense, "…today everything is presented as a possibility" for young people (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p.7); rather than the 'normal' biographies of the industrial era (linear, predictable routes of sequential development from schooling to employment), young people experience the 'choice' biographies of the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). Young people today face new risks and opportunities, with traditional links between family, school and work having weakened, and a variety of routes available which involve uncertain outcomes (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Indeed, "…the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing… Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made (Beck, 1992, p.135).

Acknowledging such an active role for the young person and their developing aspirations suggests more individualistic choice trajectories for youth today. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) warn of the dangers of presuming all young people possess reflexivity as standard (that they are conscious of their position, the opportunities available to them and how to realise their choices); this capability is affected by the same constraints which differentiate access to resources and role models for example (e.g. gender, ethnicity). Yet "...some contemporary accounts of reflexive modernisation underplay the social structuring of the psychic and emotional resources on which reflexivity depends and overplay the ability of personal life-planning to overcome the class-based, material bases of social exclusion" (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005, p.211). Indeed, "Processes of individualization appear not to have eliminated or even reduced such structural effects" (Andres *et al.,* 1999, p.278) so even in instances where young people have "…moved consistently to pre-formulated goals, these aims themselves, and the individual's ability to realise them, were products of their structural location'." (Roberts *et al.*,1994, in Andres *et al.*, 1999, p.278). The young person's life course is "never simply the product of rationally determined choice" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p.593); opportunity

structures (or overarching social structures) will shape and constrain the 'menu' of rational choices available to each young person (Roberts, 2003). What has emerged is a picture of the young person as active and rational in negotiating options regarding their life course, with the caveat that they can "…only choose between what is available to them" (Robb *et al.*, 2007, p.740). In this way, educational routes and choices continue to "reflect unequal access to cultural, social and economic capital" (Reay *et al.*, 2001). The following section will discuss recent policy solutions aimed at raising young people's aspirations and offering ways in which young people can realise their aspirations for education and employment.

2.8   Influencing youth aspiration through policy and practice

From 1997 onwards, New Labour's interest was in the future of children; the end goal to create adult citizens who engaged in paid employment and the means by which to achieve this are "control, prevention, intervention" (Mayall, 2006, p.10).

> …education policy in the UK, including basic decisions about the legitimate purpose of educating children, has often been shaped by policy-makers' perceptions of the economic demands that the UK would face in the short-term and medium-term future […] valuing children as a state investment continues to give policy-makers powerful justifications for shaping children's lives (Lee, 2005, p.11).

This shift towards welfarism solidified ideas around the family and family upbringing as responsible for the creation of productive future citizens. While the state welfare system recognised families living in poverty needed support with this role, the same policy viewed such poverty as "rooted in their behaviour and values …[that] the poor were still to blame for their condition" (Jones, 2002, p.105). This understanding of the family, the individual, as responsible for their own situation (impoverished or otherwise) is observed in health, education and social policy during the research period, with New Labour initiatives like Sure Start[6], Connexions[7] and Aimhigher[8] focused on socially excluded

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[6] Sure Start is a government programme providing services for pre-school children and their families. It works to bring together early education, childcare, health and family support. Services provided include advice on health care and child development, play schemes, parenting classes, family outreach support and adult education and advice. [online] http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Dl1/Directories/DG_10010859 (accessed 11 June 2011)

[7] Connexions was announced in 1999 (SEU, 1999) and rolled out nationally in 2001. Personal Advisers (PA) delivered the support service to 13-19 year olds, aiming to: provide all young people with help and support to progress to further stages in education and work; offer information, advice and guidance on learning and career options as well as access to personal development opportunities; raise aspirations and motivation to retain students and promote achievements; and help young people overcome barriers to participation in learning and work (DfES, 2001, p.5). In 2005, 'Youth Matters' (DfES, 2005a) outlined the end of Connexions as an independent organisation, but encouraged local authorities to maintain the Connexions 'brand' in reference to services which replaced Connexions.

families and young people, intending to raise standards in health and education to meet ideologically imposed expectations of 'family' and 'child'. Note the return to the dominating influence of developmental psychology upon policymaking, which recognises "…problems besetting children [as] individual rather than socio-political" (Mayall, 2006, p.13). Mayall (2006, p.10) argues childhood in the present tense is devalued, that such policies are "increasing government control over children and childhood itself".

Archer *et al.* (2005, p.13) draw attention to terminology in such policy discourse where 'social exclusion' and similar are "loaded terms that conceptualise middle class experience as normative, and depict working classes as deficient in some way (Reay, 2004b)…". The focus of government policy for working class families began to change towards the end of the twentieth century with "the introduction of state policies intent upon playing down the expectations of such children and young people and encouraging them to view any job, however menial and mind destroying, as a reasonable aspiration" (Jones, 2002, p.111). State agencies play a significant part in maintaining family ideology, promoting particular understandings of family life and discouraging others (Bernardes, 1997, p.31), operating as "a framework which makes certain outcomes more likely than others." (Allan and Crow, 2001, p.13). Various agencies (including religious leaders, journalists and professionals in services for children and young people) then take up and distribute this norm through their practice (Morgan, 1999).

As the pathway to adulthood becomes ever more complex, with increased risk at stages of transition, greater emphasis is placed upon the possession of soft, or non-cognitive, skills (such as teamwork, communication, aspirations etc) required to negotiate the journey (DCFS, 2007), which can help young people "to develop 'resilience'", making them "…more able to withstand the negative effects of particular events or circumstances." (Kenrick, 2009, p.4). Greater interest in this area is illustrated in a number of government policy over recent years, including the Children's Plan (DfES, 2007), Aiming High for Young People (DCFS, 2007), Education and Skills Bill 2007-08, Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Maintaining the Excellent Progress (DfES, 2006a), 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005a), Youth Matters (DfES, 2005b), and Every Child Matters Next Steps (DfES, 2004b). Traditional indicators of outcomes, such as socio-economic status, parental occupation, housing and poverty, are

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[8] Aimhigher is a national programme to widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented communities. By building cross-sector partnerships, the aim is to break down barriers created by which institutions and systems. Funded activities include summer schools at university, taster days, masterclasses, visits to HE providers and one-to-one mentoring programmes. [online] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/ [accessed 18 July 2011]

now considered alongside 'soft' indicators, like parenting quality, aspirations and expectations (DCFS, 2007). The relationship between aspirational level and positive outcomes is demonstrated in situations where non-cognitive skills are lacking, for example low levels of aspiration and poor motivation are seen as "…a major determinant of NEET[9] status" (Yates and Payne, 2006, p.330). Recognising that the aspirations of young people have been shown to "…mediate substantially relationships between family background and young adults' eventual educational and occupational attainments" (Marjoribanks, 2002, p.34), youth aspirations have found a niche in policy and practice. Research focused on developing an understanding of aspirations, how they form and change over time, "…is crucial for clarifying why educational aspirations eventuate in highly diverse educational outcomes" along the lines of gender, ethnicity and social class (Kao and Tienda, 1998, p.350).

Richards (2009) found that the proportion of young people from poorer families obtaining a degree has increased from 6% to 9%, the proportion of young people from richer families has increased from 20% to 47%. This cycle of under-achievement and persistent attainment gap is said to be exacerbated by a 'poverty of aspiration' (see Vardy, 2006; Aynsley-Green, 2008) in the more vulnerable families in society; if parents have low aspirations for their children, and children have low aspirations for themselves, the demand they are able to exert on the system to ensure public services meet their needs may be diminished (DCFS, 2007). The last Labour government (1997-2010) intended to close the gap in educational attainment and "break a cycle of under-achievement, poverty and low aspiration" (DCFS, 2007, p.28-29). However, the idea, 'poverty of aspiration', is itself questioned (see Goldthorpe, 1996) as it is framed within a deficit model which presumes a rationalistic approach to participation in learning and education (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a). Here participation is viewed as "rational and desirable, because it can result in social and economic benefits for individuals, communities and the nation", whilst non-participation is linked to "a lack of information, aspiration and motivation"; the official response is to then address this 'deficit' by raising awareness and understanding of the opportunities available after compulsory education (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.54). This deficit account places blame for low aspirations upon the individual and does not recognise that parents' ability to make demands on the system is also affected by the middle-class nature of the education market itself (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995).

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[9] Not in education, employment or training

Having discussed the purpose and impact of policy in practice, I now turn to specific examples of recent education policy designed to influence young people's aspirations for education and employment. The 'Positive Activities for Young People' initiative (DfES, 2007) was introduced in 2007 to work with young people aged 8-19 years most at risk of social exclusion, committing crime, or being a victim of crime; by offering them support, guidance and positive activities (e.g. sports and physical activities, attending clubs and societies, volunteering), they would build resilience, raise aspirations and a confidence to achieve. Confirming this relationship, Kasim and Dzakiria (1998, p.62) suggest "…recreation has quite strong positive bearings on students' attitude, motivation and expectation towards formal education". Students with high self-esteem were more likely to participate in positive activities, such as musical groups, team sports, outdoor recreation and social activities, whilst those with lower self-esteem were much less involved (Kasim and Dzakiria, 1998). However, the combination of low self-esteem and low aspirations, in addition to "the self-protective strategy" of avoiding further educational failure was "ingrained and over-rode many attempts to 'raise' the pupils' aspirations" (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.60). Indeed, young people's reticence in taking up the educational and recreational opportunities available, such as those offered through Positive Activities for Young People, is evident in their very avoidance of them (Cieslik and Simpson, 2006).

While MORI (2004) found that "…the majority of 11- to 16-year-olds said they were fairly or very likely to go on to higher education", this was not a straightforward choice but a complicated decision which had to be 'worth it' financially (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a). Presenting a range of possibilities to young people with limited opportunities may help develop the aspirations (Andres *et al.*, 1999); so widening participation initiatives like Aimhigher and local mentoring schemes "can help by providing critical information and knowledge, thus serving as a vehicle to raise aspirations" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.4). However, such a rationalistic perspective does not reflect the reality of young people as decision-makers. In particular, young people's opinions of their own ability and self-worth (part of their learner identity), combined with structural influences, can act "in opposition to […] sources of support" in the form of aspiration-raising initiatives (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.66). The sense of "knowing their limits" also circumscribed youths' aspirations as "…they appeared to consciously opt for 'safe' routes, sticking to doing what [they're] 'good at'." (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a, p.58). Further, in 'choosing' not to pursue post-compulsory education, policy texts assume this to be a reflection of "low aspirations among working class young people", which is met with further government response to raise aspirations to increase "their motivation and

engagement with learning" (Archer *et al.*, 2005, p.109). Significantly, regarding the impact of aspirations on attainment, "…increases in attainment scores related to changes in educational aspirations were greater at higher performance levels than at lower academic performance scores" (Marjoribanks, 2003, p.240), suggesting the very group targeted with initiatives to raise aspirations, thus educational attainment, do not benefit as much as those already showing academic ability.

Ball*,* Maguire and Macrae (2000, p.147) felt it increasingly necessary "to eschew over-simplistic characterizations of young people evident in policy documents – as individual, rational calculators or human capitalists" as they did not represent the reality of the lives of the young people that participated. The impact of changes in policy and economy upon labour, education and training markets has individualised the transition from school to work (Pollock, 1997); young people from all backgrounds "…are expected to make good choices in new spheres and relating to new life trajectories", even when they may feel ill-equipped and unprepared to do so (Yates, 2008, p.4). It is particularly important to consider the *impact* of such a changing environment upon young people's aspirations, whether it is in fact mirrored in their ambitions and hopes, and how this effects educational and occupational attainment. Yates' (2008, p.9) research would suggest this is not the case and young people will face greater uncertainty as a consequence:

> ...overall young people's responses to increasingly insecure and uncertain labour markets seem largely to centre on holding aspirations for *more secure* forms of employment, a labour market uncertainty does not seem to translate into aspirational uncertainty... many young people, especially the lowest achieving, do not form aspirations that reflect the reality of the new labour markets, long-term planning is often lacking, and a short-termist mind-set might take hold in a significant number. (my italics)

Other research also demonstrates that while insecure and uncertain job markets prevail, young people apparently continue to pursue traditional employment aspirations:

> …participants from all ethnic groups were oriented to the ideal of the young, upwardly mobile professional, a status accompanied by financial security, a stable relationship and their own house in the future. The transition from education to the labour market was, it might be argued, envisaged to be more or less linear (Cassidy O'Connor and Dorrer, 2006, p.16).

It is this gap then, between aspirations for a linear transition and the reality of the labour market post-education, which needs to be addressed in order to prepare young people for this transition.

Social policy remains a "vital structural element" which imposes upon working-class children to reshape their lives, thus Lavalette and Cunningham (2002, p.22) warn that whilst it may be "the fashion to assert the role of the child as an active agent shaping their lives and institutions we must not forget the powerful sources that limit and restrict our lives and act upon us." In essence, this means "possibilities for new masculinities, new femininities and new ethnicities [are] still highly contingent upon class, locality and culture" (Nayak, 2003, p.170). Whilst government policy continues to target young people of lower social classes and those who are socially excluded as an homogenous group with similar needs and attributes, intervening to raise educational standards and improve social mobility, their approach is based on an understanding of the young person as rational decision-maker and thus lays blame for failure at the level of the individual. This approach takes little account of the context of lived experiences, including gender, cultural and ethnic differences. Whilst young people's aspirations predict their educational attainment, "efforts to boost young people's aspirations are valuable in and of themselves"; however, "this must take place alongside measures that *facilitate* the *achievement* of aspirations, particularly for the most disadvantaged young people" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.20) (my italics). In this way, the focus of policy should not therefore only consider raising youth aspirations, but also supporting young people to realise their aspirations once taking into account their lived contexts, their needs and current labour market conditions. To achieve this, research is needed to develop a greater understanding of young people's aspirations; how they are shaped, how they influence and are influenced by individual, contextual and structural factors, the degree to which external intervention can build aspiration, and whether softer indicators of outcomes can override the harder, traditional indicators.

This chapter has introduced key literature to describe the various factors which intersect to influence young people's aspirations. I have set this literature within the sociology of childhood and youth to explore the impact of wider social constructs of youth, through policy and education practice, upon young women's aspirations. The following chapter outlines how my research approach intended to examine the stories of six young women in the North East in order to create comprehensive accounts of their developing aspirations.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research tells the stories of six young women aged 10-14 years in the North East of England. A small scale, case study approach is used in recognition of the need to gather "personal detail" and construct a "comprehensive picture" of what is happening in the lives of these young people (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001, p.41). By providing insight into the meanings people ascribe to particular events, behaviours and value systems, my research will reflect the participants' perspective of their world and their place within it; this perspective is particularly significant in research with children and young people, which historically has been centred upon the views of adults, rather than listening to the voices of children and young people themselves (McKechnie, 2002a). The qualitative, case study approach used here reflects my desire to stay as close to the participants' lived realities as possible through data collection and analysis within a grounded theory framework. Grounded theory is developed inductively (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) as theory emerges incrementally as data is collected, analysed and reflected upon (McKechnie, 2002a). The methodological approach adopted here has been used extensively in academic and policy orientated research on children and young people (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1377).

Epistemologically, my research is constructionist in orientation. Specifically, this research reflects the view that all reality is constructed within the confines of the culture in which we live; our culture "…shapes the way in which we see things…and gives us a quite definite view of the world" (Crotty, 1998, p.58). Rather than viewing 'knowledge' as purely rational and objective, social constructionists argue that "knowledge arises from processes more related to ideology, interests, or power" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.25). Such an epistemological approach is pertinent within the sociology of childhood, which views childhood itself as socially constructed, albeit dominated by a Westernised concept of what childhood is and how children should behave (Lavelette and Cunningham, 2002). My research sits most comfortably within the critical and social degrees of social constructionism (Barlebo Wenneberg, 2001, in Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.35), whereby 'natural' and self-evident phenomena, such as youth, are shown to be socially constructed, and that society is produced and reproduced by shared meanings and conventions. Social constructionism is often criticised for being more interested in how reality is constructed rather than considering *why* (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.37). Alderson (2004, p.1010) moves beyond this focus on *how*

childhood is constructed to include the *impact* of this upon children who live 'within' it: "It is as if we put children into a small glass cage called childhood, and then examine how they perform within the cage's restrictions, instead of looking critically at the cage itself". The 'glass cage' refers to the (Westernised) socially constructed concept of childhood. Children and young people are examined within this particular framework of understanding, rather than giving due consideration to how *and* why the 'cage' (construct) exists and its impact upon its population.

Alderson's (2004) analogy of the 'glass cage' of childhood refers to this dominant developmental model as skewing the focus of research into childhood away from its cause and effect, which can be particularly restrictive in the case of research engaging children (Danby and Farrell, 2004). In embracing the sociology of childhood, I am working within a paradigm which recognises children as competent individuals, active in constructing their own social worlds, and capable of participating in research (Danby and Farrell, 2005; 2004; MacKay, 1991). This view of children and childhood drives my methodology and research design: children and young people are viewed as active participants. Alderson (2000, in Farrell, 2005) describes such participants as willingly taking part in research with flexible methods, for example, the use of drama, diaries, photos or paintings created by children. In employing similarly flexible participatory methods, I aim to support the young people participating to demonstrate their competencies rather than their assumed deficits (Alderson, 2004). Recognising young people as competent research participants and offering them a 'voice' within a research community creates a space for participants to express agency and control within the research process.

3.2   Researcher reflexivity

In accepting reality is socially constructed, and in particular the construct of childhood, one must also accept this perspective will influence research principles, how research with children and young people is conducted, and subsequent interpretation of findings (David *et al.*, 2005; Farrell, 2005; Morrow, 2005). It is important to bear in mind that research "reflects *how* the researcher looks as much as it reflects *what* was seen" (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p.73). This is particularly relevant in terms of discussing 'truth' and knowledge given that the researcher's theoretical perspective and the role they adopt during the research process will inevitably influence both (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p.75). In this way, I bring "theoretical orientations and a lifetime of experiences to bear in

framing, analyzing and interpreting" my research (Bettis, 1996, p.110). In view of this, I must be reflexive in my research approach, exploring how my own perspective affects the ongoing process – my original concept and research questions, methodological approach and choice of research tool, interaction with participants, interpretation of data etc (Graue and Walsh, 1998).

3.3   Methods

Applying a case study approach to collect comprehensive qualitative data enabled a critical analysis of the lives of six young people in the North East, offering "snapshots of lives in progress" (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.10). Using a multiple case study method allows consideration of pertinent contextual conditions (Yin, 2003); opting for this approach should provide "more compelling" evidence which is regarded as being "more robust" (Herriot and Firestone, 1983, p.41). Like Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, p.596), my decision to focus on a small sample to explore individual cases is a significant one as it allows me "…to expose the uniqueness of particular transformations and learning careers, while locating them within broader social and economic patterns […] there are many individual variations, and these variations are highly significant". A focus on uniqueness is not at the cost of highlighting broader patterns; both are valuable and do not exist without the other (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). Certainly, it is the responsibility of the researcher within their case study analysis to piece together the "different accounts…weav[ing] aspects of them into one overall interpretation" (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003, p.17).

My pursuit of a smaller, disparate sample is also a response to a gap in evidence. The preoccupation of sociology upon the "melodramatic and problematic" has often been at the cost of understanding and underestimating the "complexity" of the lives of "mainstream youth" (Miles, 2000, p.3). Instead, research focusing on the social structural aspects of childhood and youth should

> …be placed more firmly within the immediate context of everyday youthscapes where the fluidity, complexity and ambiguities of individual and collective biographies are brightly illuminated. Here, the 'centrality of identity and the subtle interplay of individual agency, circumstance *and* social structure' (Thompson *et al.*, 2002, p.336) should be of primary significance to transitional accounts (Nayak, 2003, p.178). (my italics).

My sample size and composition will support a micro-level exploration of the lives of this group of young people, illuminating their particular experiences and developing

aspirations within the context in which they are situated and capturing the complex interrelatedness of agency, locality and social structures.

3.4 Sample

Theoretical sampling is a central principle of grounded theory, in which "*any groups at all can in principle be compared*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009:67). Participants are recruited who have different experiences of the particular phenomenon being studied in order to examine its "multiple dimensions" (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1375). The basic question of theoretical sampling is "*What* groups or subgroups of populations, events, activities (to find varying dimensions, strategies, etc) does one turn to *next* in data collection? And for *what* theoretical purpose? So, this process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory" (Strauss, 1987, p.38-9).

Recruitment of my participants occurred for the most part across a three month period in 2006 (September – November), then a final recruitment phase six months later in 2007; they are described below in groups A-D to reflect their point of recruitment. There were two main steps in this process, with the emerging theory (from the data) controlling the process throughout; differences between groups are minimized and then maximized. By minimizing differences, the aim is to quickly find "the basic categories and their properties", which can begin with a single case; by maximizing differences between comparison groups, the researcher can "investigate these category properties in their greatest possible range, and begin weaving them together into a more substantial theory" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.67).

3.4.1 Research participants

Group A

The three participants[10] in this first group were recruited during the project's pilot research stage through engagement events organised by Aspire[11] in August 2006.

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[10] Four male participants were engaged during recruitment of groups A, B and C; however, following the withdrawal of three male participants (groups A and C) at the second and third rounds of data collection, I opted to exclude the remaining male from my final thesis. Gender is a significant factor influencing young people's aspirations and having only one male to six female participants in my sample did not allow sufficient analyses of this influencer. This accounts for a recommendation for further research in this area to examine male aspirations for education and employment.

[11] Aspire had organised a promotional tour of the North East in the summer of 2006, travelling around on a large double-decker bus to 6 cities across the region to engage with young people to raise awareness of Aspire and employers in the North East. The tour provided an excellent opportunity for me to access

Table 1: Group A participants

Group A	Urban areas in East of the region	
Participant	*Age/school year*	*Notable characteristics*
Clare	13 (Year 9)	Only child, single parent household; attends single sex Catholic school, same school as Val
Val	14 (Year 10)	Attends single sex Catholic school, same school as Clare
Sadie	14 (Year 10)	Single parent household; attends comprehensive school

Group B

Following preliminary analysis of group A data, family relationships were identified as particularly pertinent; I wanted to investigate this further by engaging participants of a younger age. There is one participant in group B[12]; data collection began in September 2006.

Table 2: Group B participants

Group B	Urban area in East of the region	
Participant	*Age/school year*	*Notable characteristics*
Eleanor	11 (Year 7)	Practicing Christian; attends middle school

Group C

Following preliminary analysis of data from groups A and B, I deduced any additional participants should represent the experiences of young people outside the boundaries of 'mainstream' youth. During an informal discussion with an employee at Aspire in which I highlighted capturing 'difference' within young people's lives, she suggested young Travellers. This offered my sample a unique point of contrast, examining ethnic identity as a facet of 'belonging' and the influence of this upon developing aspirations. An

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young people and recruit participants and pilot various research tools. Aspire had expressed they would like my research to recruit 'Joe Bloggs', young people considered mainstream, as 'typical' representatives of youth in order to better understand their aspirations; their hope was the bus tour would provide access to such young people across the North East. Aspire's interest here seems to reflect the concerns shared by Miles (2000), whereby there is a lack of understanding about the lives of 'mainstream youth'.

[12] The participant in group B was engaged via a family acquaintance, involved in a local Church youth group; she suggested a family she knew in her church group may be interested in participating and she was happy to approach them on my behalf. This offered another interesting variation to explore, that of religion. Following verbal agreement from the young person to receive a recruitment pack and pass on their contact details, I contacted her mother by telephone; she spoke with her daughter and agreed to consent to her participation in my study. Recruitment packs were sent out; Eleanor returned her signed consent form, agreeing to participate in the research.

acquaintance of hers was a Project Worker working with young Travellers in the North East[13], highlighting Traveller issues and creating opportunities for young people to share those issues to provoke action, who agreed to engage young people from two fixed sites in the North of the region[14].

Data collection began in November 2006.

Table 3: Group C participants

Group C	Rural area in North of the region	
Participant	*Age/school year*	*Notable characteristics*
Charlotte	12 (Year 8)	Lives on fixed site for Travellers; attends middle school

Group D

The recruitment of this group occurred somewhat later than that of groups A, B and C, reflecting to some degree the changing needs of my studentship funder, specifically, an interest in young people defined as being 'note in education, employment or training' (NEET), but also in response to theoretical sampling. There is one participant in group D; data collection began in May 2007.

Table 4: Group D participants

Group D	Rural area in South of the region	
Participant	*Age/school year*	*Notable characteristics*
Carley	14 (Year 10)	Lives with mother, stepfather, siblings and nephew; no contact with biological father; 'not in education, employment or training'; engaged with Connexions

3.4.2   Other participants

In response to emerging data and ongoing analysis, the range of participants involved in the research was expanded following the third round of data collection (see appendix A for details of additional participants recruited and for timetable of data collection) to

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[13] The name of the charity running the project has been anonymised; it will be referred to as 'Travellers North East' throughout

[14] In order to establish initial contact with the young Travellers and build some level of familiarity, I attended a project activities event at a local theme park. After meeting with the young people, the Project Worker explained contacting their parents would be paramount to their participation, particularly as I was an outsider unknown to the parents and children. I arranged to meet the parents in their homes during site visits by the Project Worker, who accompanied me whilst I met with the parents. On gaining verbal consent from the parents and young people, recruitment packs were distributed; one young person returned their signed consent form.

include what I refer to as 'significant others'. These participants were identified by the young people as someone who was important in their lives, who they felt influenced their choices and decisions, and potentially played a role in their ideas for education and employment for the future. The choice of significant other varied throughout the sample, including friends, family members and school/support staff. The qualitative method selected for engaging with this group of participants was discussed with each young person and chosen on the basis of their recommendations. Methods included: face-to-face semi-structured interview and questionnaire by email. The young people were also given the option to join the data collection sessions with their significant others; three of them chose to do so.

3.5   Access and maintaining contact

Making use of an organised event (Aspire's summer tour) allowed me to take advantage of incentives offered by Aspire on their promotional tour, pilot data collection techniques and provided access to a diverse population of young people. Existing contacts were heavily relied upon in order to gain access to appropriate participants (Buchanan *et al.*, 1988), particularly in the case of the young people themselves; Aspire and its employees were particularly helpful in suggesting 'gatekeepers' through which I might engage young people, including a Project Worker for Travellers North East and a Personal Adviser for Connexions. Using personal and business contacts already engaged with young people allowed access to a range of potential participants and also overcame some 'gatekeeping' issues (particularly with regard to groups C and D*)*, which may have otherwise hampered attempts to engage with such populations of young people.

3.6   Research design

The research design embraces the role of children and young people as active agents in constructing childhood and youth, reflecting the tenets of the sociology of childhood in its methods and approach. In adopting a biographical approach to data collection, I intended to avoid the tendency of research agendas studying younger generations to become "predetermined by the life experiences and intellectual preoccupations of their predecessors" (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001, p.94). Although the research topic is defined by me, the biographical approach, using participatory methods, should diminish my control over the data offered for collection. I also gave participants the choice of where data collection would take place; for the majority this was in their own home in a shared family

room, although one participant preferred school premises. In addition, applying a multi-method strategy will "…support and recognise the diverse ways in which children from diverse contexts might feel most able to share their ideas" (MacNaughton, 2003, in Farrell, 2005). An advantage of using multiple methods of data collection is that the strengths of one particular method can compensate for any weaknesses in others (Young and Barrett, 2001). The methods I employed include: participatory diagramming, memory books, semi-structured interview, focus group, and participant-as-researcher (see table 5 for description of each method). In using such a wide range of participatory methods, I intended to: encourage continuing engagement with the research; maintain participants' interest; build on the preferred method of communication of each participant; incorporate participant feedback/verification processes regarding the methods used; support participants to undertake elements of data collection; and develop a portfolio of biographical evidence for each participant over the period of engagement. While the choice of method used depended upon the type of data sought, it also took into account the participant being engaged and reflected their needs, abilities, preferences etc. Further, adopting visual methods of data collection such as these enabled participants "to construct accounts of their lives in their own terms" (Holloway and Valentine, 2000, in Young and Barrett 2001, p.143) and avoided discrimination "between those with difference abilities, confidence levels and educational attainment" (Young and Barrett, 2001, p.151).

3.7   Limitations

Whilst qualitative research is criticised regarding the subjectivity of the data it generates (McKechnie, 2002a), this does not account for the interpretations made by the audience of *all* research, they bring with them their own "theoretical orientations and […] lifetime of experiences" (Bettis, 1996, p.110), making all research findings open for interpretation by those who read them. Hodkinson *et al.* (1996, p.2) describe qualitative researchers as storytellers who tell their 'stories' to engage readers, allowing them "…to make their own interpretations" of what they are told. In this sense, the issue of a small-scale, non-representative sample is not detrimental to my research project, as I do not intend to generalise findings to the larger population. My purpose was to undertake research which allowed me to "maximize the opportunity to change focus, modify questions, find new ways of generating data, identify issues that are unaddressed within current data sources, and shape writing through local ideas" (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p.159).

Table 5: Summary of data collection methods

Method	Description	Key benefits
Participatory diagramming (Pain and Francis, 2003)	· Used a variety of exercises, like mapping, timelines, pie charts, matrices, cartoons etc, to support participants to produce "inclusive accounts using their own words and frameworks of understanding" (Pain and Francis, 2003, p.46). · Used each activity to support discussion with participants e.g. ask questions as participants draw, probe for further information.	· Adaptable, effective in including marginalised groups and overcoming barriers to participation, produces "robust…data in an ethical way" (Pain and Francis, 2003, p.46). · By using PD in response to participants' ability, interest and understanding, they are supported to choose their level of involvement in the research process.
Memory book (Thomson and Holland, 2005)	· A blank notebook to be used by participants in between face-to-face session with the researcher; they record: thoughts, feelings and ideas generally; information about significant people, places and events; experiences as a participant and recommendations to the researcher. · Free to use the memory book in any way they wish – draw, write, include memorabilia etc. · Used 'trigger stickers' to provide structure to memory books when needed	· "…less driven by [their] research agendas and more by the young person" (Thomson and Holland, 2005, p.214). · Facilitates discussion with participants. · Offered participants opportunity to think about their aspirations, how they might achieve them etc. · Maintained confidentiality through decisions they made regarding sharing their memory book. · Can compensate for weaknesses arising in interview alone e.g. "high level of glossing" during interviews (Thomson and Holland, 2005, p.212) · Enriches story built around each participant (Thomson and Holland, 2005).
Semi-structured interview (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994)	· Methods described above were usually either undertaken or utilised during semi-structured interview · Interviewer asks participant to give an account of their own experience, intended "to elicit the participant's story"; participant encouraged "to elaborate on the details to achieve clarity and to stay close to the lived experience" (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1375).	· Enables focused, conversational, two-way communication. · Flexibility to probe for details and follow alternative topics. · Participants explore themes on their own terms. · When individuals are interviewed they may more easily discuss sensitive issues.
Participant-led questionnaire	· Participants conducted brief questionnaire with their parent/carer (see appendix B for questionnaire). · Helped to break down barriers between participants and researcher. · Purpose was three-fold: to gather basic data from participants' parents/carers on experiences of and opinions on topics; to encourage participants to share experiences and thoughts with parents on topics discussed; offering degree of control to participants and shifting power balance in their direction.	· The data generated offered insight into the education and employment background of the parents (for some, the only data I would have from their parents) and, for those participants who chose their parent as a 'significant other', the data provided a starting point for the subsequent interview schedules.

3.8 Ethical considerations

To conduct ethical research one must account for "children's competence as reliable informants" in conjunction with "their potential vulnerability" resulting from power differentials between researcher and young person (Farrell, 2005, p.170). Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) describe this ethical responsibility as an enabling role, to guide participation in research in ways which suit their understanding, their interests and preferred communication methods. The participatory methods of data collection adopted in this research strategy take such an ethical approach in their flexible and responsive framework. Ultimately, children and young people are no different as research participants than adults and their rights over the research process should remain the same, including their right to withdraw data from a research project, their opportunity to comment on how their data is interpreted and presented to others, having the research findings reported back to them and being part of recording their own data (MacNaughton and Smith, 2005).

In designing the research strategy, I also intended that participation in the study would reap some level of benefit for the young people involved. This was particularly important given they were sacrificing a good deal of time over a 21 month period, with no financial incentive to engage. It is impossible to identify definite benefits to the participants, but there was potential for "strengthened capacity" for participants (Tayler *et al.*, 2005, p.144). Encouraging participants to become researchers (by interviewing their parents, peers etc), making entries in a memory book, and generally sharing the research process with them, may build a variety of skills and self-awareness. Moreover, whilst I benefit from greater insight into "the meanings of lived experiences", the participants can develop "ways of thinking about their lives not normally available" (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p.242). My study required formal ethical approval as outlined in Northumbria University's 'Ethics in Research' policy. I submitted my 'Initial Project Approval' report to the ethics committee in the School of Arts and Social Sciences (Northumbria University), where it was approved and I was able to pursue active research. Young people's consent to participate in this research was given as an informed decision after dialogue between myself and the participant regarding the aims and objectives, research process and outcomes had occurred. In addition to verbal communications, it is suggested "accessible and readable material" is also provided, which reiterates the dialogue as well as explaining "what rights they have in the process and most importantly they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time" (France, 2004). This took the form of a participant information pack (see appendix C), which gave information about the purpose of the research, its aims and

objectives, and the reason for their involvement. The pack was also intended for perusal by the parent(s)/carer(s); all research participants under 16 require the consent of their parent/carer once their own informed consent has been given. If either party refuses consent to participate, the young person is not able to engage in the research. Included within the information pack was a consent form; once participants had had the opportunity to consider the information in the recruitment pack, I asked if they had any questions for me before they decided to participate. Once participants were happy to participate, they gave informed consent by signing the attached form and returning it to me. Participants were also assured any data collected would remain confidential. In addition, all data is anonymised to avoid any identification of participants.

All participants were told they could withdraw at any time from the research process or withhold information they felt they did not want to contribute. Issues of consent and withdrawal were revisited with participants at every round of data collection in a process of verbal re-consenting. Reminding the young person they are free to withdraw from the research process at any point with absolutely no repercussions means they act as gatekeepers of the research itself (Alderson, 2000; Danby, 1997, in Farrell 2005). The length of the research process, in addition to the potential for developing a friendship between researcher and participant, only serves to reinforce the significance of revisiting consent and reaffirming participants' rights. Participants' rights, however, as young people under 16 years old, do not override the legal responsibility of the researcher regarding the safety of the participants.

3.9   Data analysis

Defining the research in terms of the sociology of childhood enables the researcher to identify both the collective experience of childhood and youth whilst also acknowledging the significance of different lived childhoods (Fendler and Popkewitz, 1993, in Graue and Walsh, 1998). In accepting that the interpretations I produce are "theorised accounts that represent [my] sociological understandings of the social worlds of children and adults", it is possible to scrutinise both the data itself and "the social and historical moments of both the context of the study, and [my] own perspectives on childhood and [youth]" (Danby and Farrell, 2004, p.41). As a result, any claims made via the research findings are then based on a particular framework of understanding (Danby and Farrell, 2004) – in this case, the sociology of childhood and youth.

Grounded theory starts from data to create categories; this is referred to as coding. These categories are either found directly in the data themselves, stated by participants, or they are constructed by the researcher from the data (Strauss, 1987). The category created can be taken from a single incident, following which the category is developed by coding further incidents within it (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). In this sense, interpretive analysis can be described as "an iterative, inductive process of decontextualization and recontextualization"; decontextualization engages the analyst in a separation of data from the original context of single cases, then assignation of codes to "units of meaning" (i.e. to highlight themes) in the texts (mostly transcriptions); during recontextualization, the analyst uses the codes to look for patterns and then "reintegrates, organizes, and reduces the data around central themes and relationships drawn across all the cases and narratives" (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p.1375). The researcher reads all data "word by word, line by line, or at least paragraph by paragraph", continually asking within which category should the data be placed; by then "shifting [the categories] around in our minds in all possible ways […] we think out the possible properties of the categories, which can enrich them" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.62-63). It is important the researcher codes each session of data collection before the next occurs so new and relevant information can be used in future encounters; indeed, the categories, or themes, identified during coding can be explored with participants in subsequent data collection (Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

Adopting participatory methods of data collection also incorporates a level of analysis within the research design; for example, memory book excerpts were discussed by the participant with the researcher. Building in this interpretative feature enables participants' involvement in the data analysis process, which is beneficial in a number of ways: firstly, the participant is able to reaffirm the actual content of the data they provided, ensuring it is interpreted in the spirit it was meant; secondly, young people's involvement in the research process in terms of interpretation provides greater control over their contribution to the research; and finally, it is an opportunity for the researcher to consider data from an alternative perspective, that of the young person.

The small-scale nature of this research, its case study approach and participatory methods, and its focus on the individual stories of six young people in the North East locality could pose potential difficulties for data analysis and application of findings beyond its immediate context. Faced with "an almost overwhelming need to resolve the different versions of reality and to tell one coherent, rounded story" (McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, 2003, p.10), researchers struggle with ideas of 'difference' on an individual basis. If

contradictions between participants' accounts arise, these are 'excused' or explained away by emphasising the differing positions from which people are speaking or by blaming the subjective nature of the issues discussed (McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, 2003). Opposing this tendency to 'round out' versions of reality into one, McCarthy, Holland and Gillies (2003, p.6) suggest abandonment of any search for 'truth' or 'reality' within the individual accounts, instead "treating each account as indicative of the subjective reality of that individual". Focusing on many subjective realities also identifies each reality as valid, so that no one version is more authoritative than another (McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, 2003). As other participants ('significant others') were engaged in addition to the core group of young people involved, acknowledging this 'equality' of realities is important, recognising the value and worth of all contributions – young person or adult, expert or layperson alike.

Regarding grounded theory, during data analysis there are three steps to take to move from coding and categorisation to theorising. The first step is to continually write memos on theoretical ideas arising during the course of coding, in particular on "the connections between the category properties" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.68). The second step is about finding the core category, the central concept around which all the others revolve, which is seen as the key to the theory. The third step is to draw diagrams or 'models' of the way in which the categories are related to one another (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Starks and Trinidad (2007, p.1377) explain, "When the analyst synthesizes all the data…she builds a theory around a core category that explains the central phenomenon present in the data. The findings of a complete theory are often presented diagrammatically to demonstrate how the core category relates to other dominant themes." In following this process of data analysis, I developed a sociological framework of understanding for young people's developing aspirations; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory[15], as a psychological theory of human development (Darling, 2007), offered a useful foundation from which to do this. This provided a tool through which children can be seen to experience childhood at individual, local, national and global spheres. Recognising both structural determinants and individual agency within childhood, emphasis is on "the interrelationship of different (developmental) processes and their contextual variation" (Darling, 2007, p.203). Importantly, this theory highlights the contexts within which people grow, "…the cultures and meanings people share, the

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[15] A set of nested systems exist, with a close interdependence between each of the spheres as follows: the innermost layer is the microsystem and contains the structures with which children have direct contact (e.g. family, school, neighbourhood); the mesosystem provides connections between the structures within the microsystem; the exosystem includes larger social structures which children do not experience directly, but interact with structures within the microsystem (i.e. parental employment hours); the macrosystem is the outermost layer and comprises cultural values, customs and laws, which have a cascading influence upon interactions of all other layers (Berk, 2000).

policies and attitudes that impact on children and how the children themselves actively deal with their experiences" (David, 2004).

However, in separating levels, or spheres, in this manner, research of childhood itself has become 'separated out', with social scientists focusing on one level only:

> …attention may be given to 'micro' and the rest is dealt with as a more or less constant 'context'. Alternatively the wider context is studied but the linkages between this and local circumstances and practices are left unexamined or assumed (Prout, 2005, p.65).

Shinn and Rapkin (2000) describe the need to move away from multi-level towards cross-level research to concentrate on the dynamic interplay between spheres, or what Prout (2005, p.66) calls "bidirectional reciprocity [which] in practice is often left unconceptualized and unexamined". Prout (2005:66) suggests Bronfenbrenner's model does not deal with the issue of context, focusing too closely on the 'levels' themselves rather than the connections which exist between them, rendering the spheres "static" and their existence as "…given rather than produced through practice within certain historically circumscribed conditions". By taking into account the interrelationship of the various 'spheres' young women experience and the influence of their own actions upon processes of reciprocity between and within spheres (see figure 1), I will be able to achieve a cross-level analysis of their developing aspirations for education and employment.

As data was generated, coding and categorising exposed significant "patterns of similarity and difference […] in the narratives elicited from the young people" (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.17). As a result, I was able to group participants into analytic sets according to these similarities and differences (a device borrowed from Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000) allowing me to best illustrate the development of aspirations for education and employment as reflected in my model (see figure 1). The following chapter will explain the development of analytic sets and present my empirical data.
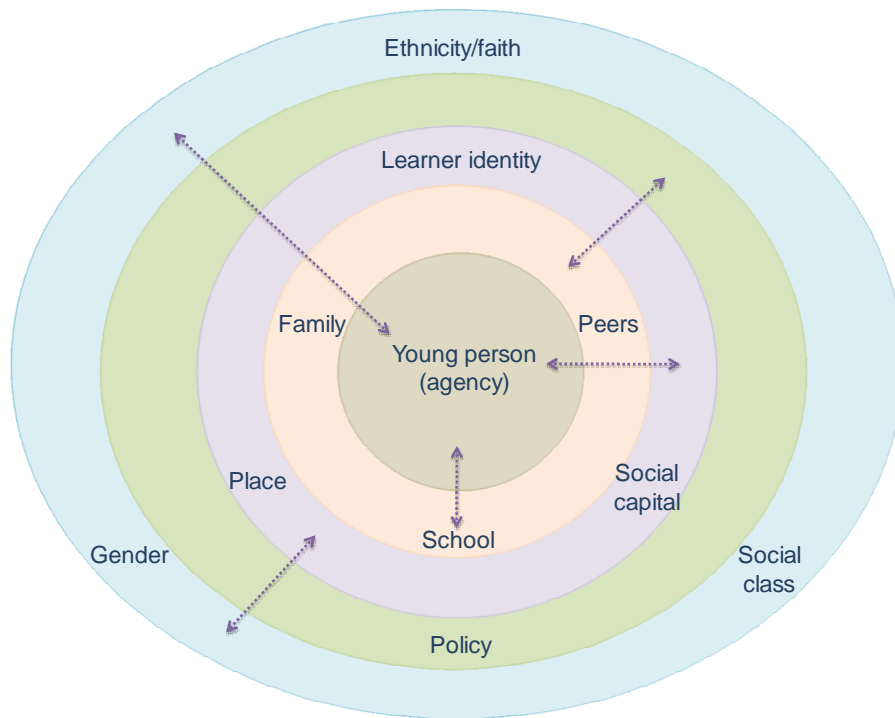
Figure 1: An adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's systems theory. Following data analysis, key themes emerged as particularly significant to understanding young women's developing aspirations for education and employment; this figure illustrates the interrelatedness of those themes within a young person's life and how themes might interact to influence developing aspirations.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1   Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse my empirical data, discussing each participant within a particular analytic set, grouped according to the most significant similarities (comparison) and/or differences (contrast) within their stories thus "…the emphasis is upon themes which are picked up within and between the sets." (Ball et al, 2000, p.17). My analytic sets enable a detailed cross-level analysis of structural, contextual and individual factors influencing participants' aspirations for education and employment. Due to the complexity of factors influencing aspirations, whilst each participant 'headlines' in a particular analytic set, they also occasionally emerge within other sets as appropriate i.e. to emphasise key moments, or acting as a comparator. This does not undermine the original selection of analytic sets, which focus on the most significant combination of factors for each participant, but does illustrate the complexity of cross and within level reciprocity influencing young people's aspirations. This approach also ensures that these groupings are not perceived as "…simplistic or absolute […] To be clear, the sets are not categories or types" (Ball et al, 2000:17).

The chapter presents three analytic sets in order to explore the developing aspirations of the young women participating: the first set will discuss the impact of labelling by educational institutions upon young people and the resources made available as a consequence (Carley and Sadie); the second set will consider the role of 'critical' incidents, or turning points, upon aspiration trajectories; the final set will explore the function of strong support networks, positive self-concept and sense of agency. For each participant, I employ a biographical timeline to represent key events, decisions etc across the period of research to give a general overview of the context of their lives during their participation. The months plotted across the centre of the timeline represent each instance of data collection; set across the top of this timeline is a record of their aspirations within the research period. I have identified particularly significant incidents to the development of participant aspirations by highlighting them within a red box.

4.2   Carley and Sadie: Labelling and provision of resources

This analytic set will discuss the influence of significant others within family and school contexts in shaping gendered aspirations and expectations for education and employment, alongside the impact of education policy in creating and/or inhibiting

opportunities and resources for female students from working class backgrounds. A common feature in their stories is the consequence of labelling young people in school; Carley as NEET (not in education, employment or training) as a result of her disengagement from school, and Sadie, in a more subtle manner, as 'resistant' due to her appearance (her performance of hyper-heterosexualised femininity, see Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007) and attitude towards school. Their experiences illustrate how such labelling, via education policy and by teaching staff, can affect subsequent guidance, resources and opportunities provided in school, which in turn influences their attitude towards education and developing aspirations. Although the NEET category carries negative connotations, for Carley being labelled thus provided the support structure and motivation she needed to succeed in school. For Sadie, although not outwardly labelled (other than as occasional truant), her character with her friends and in school would suggest an outgoing, confident girl fully able to voice her needs when necessary. Unfortunately, Sadie's 'front' may have hidden her difficulties with school, in particular her low self-esteem and lack of direction. The impact of this and the role of key figures of support will be discussed in detail and will illustrate, as with Carley's journey, a 'coming together' of moments, events and people to shape developing aspirations and drive their pursuit.
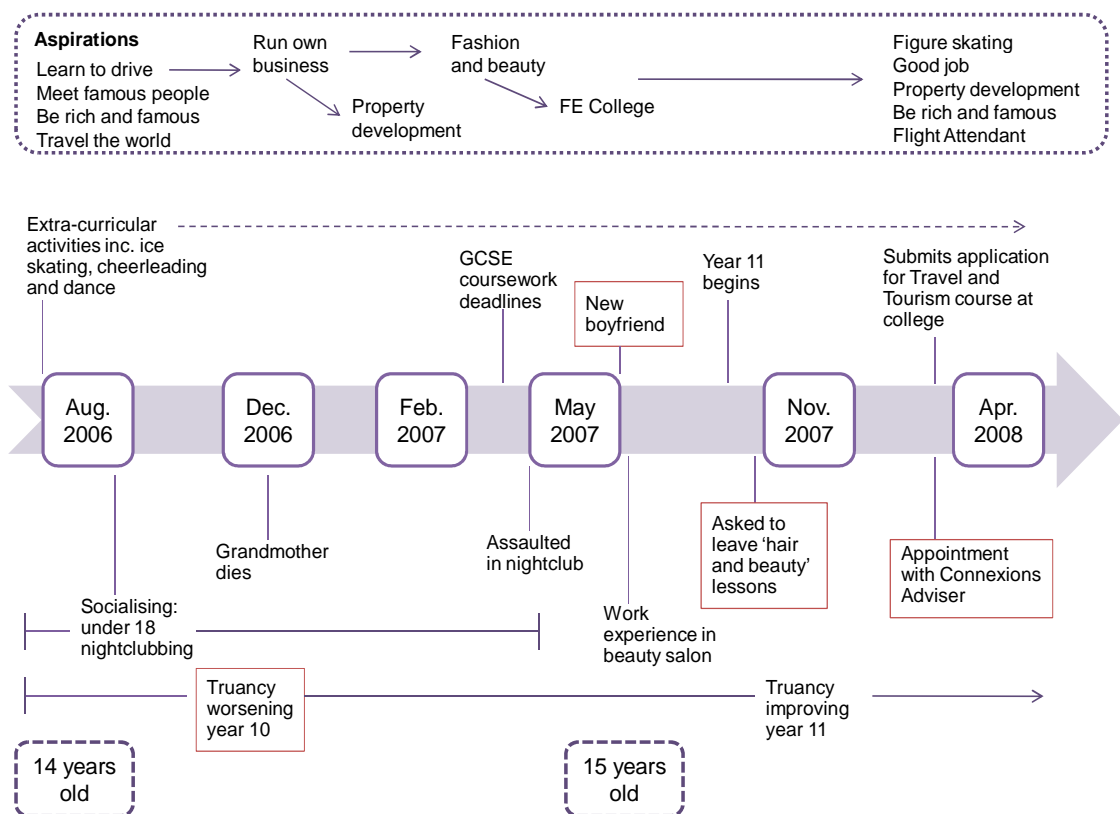
4.2.1 Sadie

Figure 2: Sadie's biographical timeline

On first meeting Sadie with her best friend in a city location (she became engaged in my research during the summer tour organised by Aspire), she appeared to be a confident, engaging and outspoken young woman. At this stage, aged 14 in late 2006, she aspired to learn to drive, meet famous people, become rich and famous as a performer, and travel the world[16]. As the research progressed, this interest in celebrity culture and its associated wealth did not wane, however growing realisation of the resources and opportunities available to her, as well as her maturing mind, led her to adjust her expectations. As the younger of two daughters, Sadie lives at home with her mother (full time carer) and her mother's partner in social housing. Her parents separated when Sadie was a baby; she has a relationship with her father (taxi driver) who lives in a nearby neighbourhood. Sadie's older sister (beauty therapist), her senior by 15 years, also lives nearby with her daughter (aged 2) and her husband. Sadie's family is small and tight-knit, based in a small cluster of local neighbourhoods within walking distance in an urban area of the North East, with excellent public transport links and good local amenities. This geographical closeness reflects the importance of family to Sadie and the significant influence they have in her life; she describes her sister as her best friend, sees herself as a role model to her young niece and spent increasing amounts of time at home with her mother and sister as the research progressed. During the research period, this family context was the source of both support and conflict in Sadie's life, affecting her behaviour and attitude at school and at home. In the two year research period, Sadie lost her grandmother (maternal) for whom her mother was full time carer; this had a significant impact upon Sadie and only reinforced her strong family values. Her sister returned home for a number of months with her niece having temporarily separated from her husband, although she later returned to her marital home and became pregnant with their second child. Throughout 2007, Sadie and her mother struggled to maintain their relationship; Sadie's truancy, repeatedly high mobile phone bills and bad attitude towards her mother appeared to be the source of this conflict. Whilst these tensions continued throughout 2007, exacerbated by what was felt to be a lack of support and guidance from school, Sadie's strong family ties won through and mother-daughter relationship restored. A combination of events in mid-2008, pivoting around last-minute careers advice via Connexions in school and guidance from her sister, had a significant impact upon Sadie's educational pathway and employment aspirations.

Sadie's truancy, although something she did not deliberately and openly discuss during interview, was a regular feature of her school life in Year 10 and early Year 11. Discussion

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[16] I chose to ask all participants to share their aspirations in general rather than focusing immediately on aspirations for education and employment; focusing on their general aspirations for the future established an initial discussion with my participants. This approach helped to build a rapport with the young people and I then followed up the specific education and employment aspirations through in-depth discussion.

with her mother, sister and best friend uncovered the reasons behind her truancy, which at some stages led Sadie to spend weeks off school at a time, which she often said was due to illness or 'sleeping in'. Data showed how a poor learner identity (Rees *et al.,* 2006), part created and exacerbated by her experiences of education, in particular her school and the curriculum available, combined with her low self-esteem, left Sadie lacking in direction and unable to access the appropriate support (see figure 3).
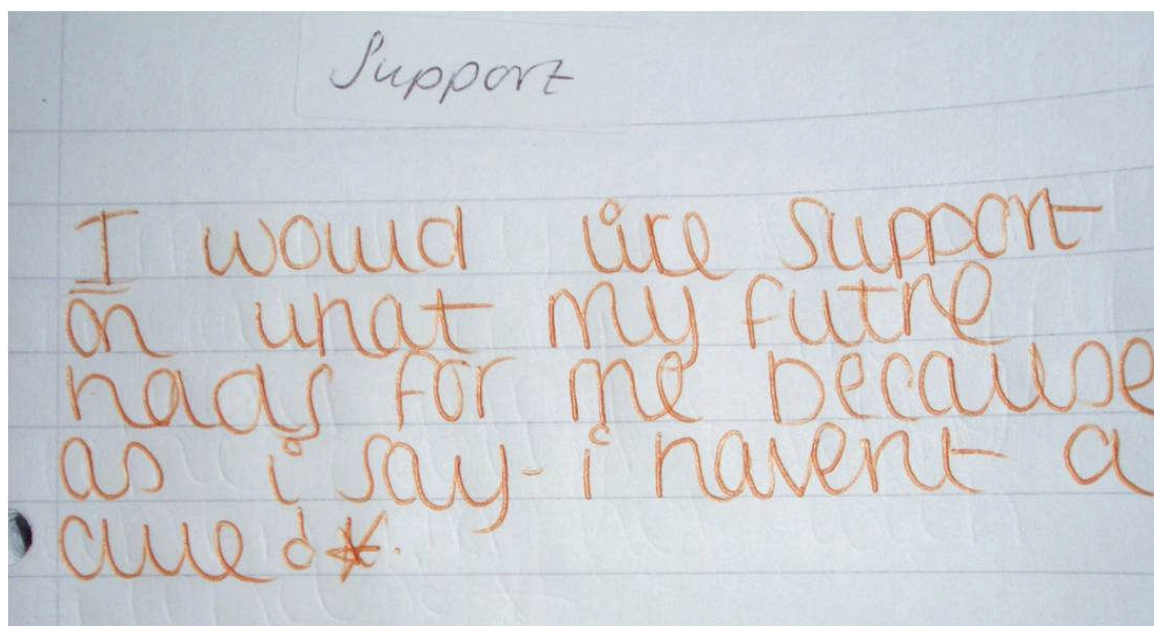
Figure 3: Excerpt from Sadie's memory book. Request for support: "I would like support on what my future holds for me because as I say – I haven't a clue!"

Without an alternative role model, with no guidance from school and a poor academic self-concept (Gutman and Akerman, 2008*)*, Sadie often followed the route most familiar to her, aspiring to a career in the beauty industry thus emulating her sister's chosen career. Whilst she had enjoyed helping her sister at her tanning studio when she was aged 11 and her school work experience at a nail bar (organised through a contact of her sister), her passion seemed to lie in fashion rather than hair and beauty. Yet this 'quiet' aspiration was not uncovered by school staff. When Sadie did make a choice to pursue Hair and Beauty as a Year 10 GCSE option, she was then asked to leave after two lessons ("They asked me and me friend to go out... there was too many people.") as the number of students in the class was too high and the school felt 'underachieving' students should take priority; Sadie was left to choose between a limited number of options and opted for Textiles. This experience left her feeling further disengaged from school and she still felt the school's actions had limited her post-16 options. She described the beauty industry as her 'fall back' option, but said her chance to pursue this career had been foreclosed "Because I haven't took anything to do with beauty".

Unfortunately, Sadie's poor learner identity meant she did not have the confidence to ask for guidance from teaching staff and seemingly this was never offered to her. This was further compounded by her regular truancy, for which she was labelled (Skopalová, 2010) as insolent and apparently undeserving (and perhaps un-accepting) of school support, in addition to the consequences of a very late appointment with Connexions at the end of Year 11. Sadie's truancy only took hold in Year 10 at the beginning of her GCSEs ("I never wagged anything last year"), when she experienced "a big difference" in the level and amount of work required of her both in and out of class. She felt teachers were not willing to help her when she found something difficult (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a).
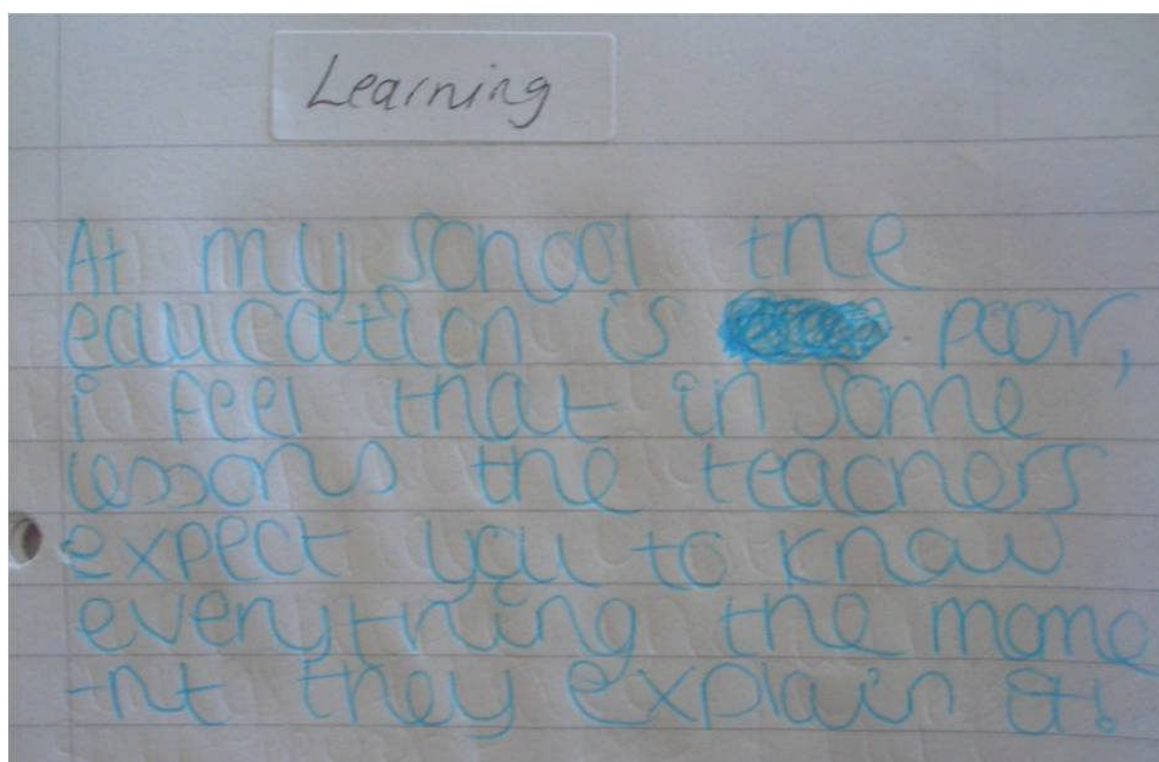
Figure 4: Excerpt from Sadie's memory book. Experience of school: " At my school the education is poor, I feel that in some lessons the teachers expect you to know everything the moment they explain it!"

> If you don't understand then [the teacher will] shout at you and say 'well, you weren't listening', and then you're like 'well, I was listening, I just don't get how to do it!' […]…but I won't go to the teacher… I don't like to ask the teacher things as well because the whole class goes quiet and everyone looks at you. And she talks really loud, as if you're stupid [Sadie].

The more Sadie found GCSE work a challenge, the less time she spent in school during Year 10 and the label of 'truant/troublemaker' was compounded by this behaviour. Sadie, her mother and her sister discussed how they tackled her truancy as a family, but no reference was made to the school's policy on truancy nor any attempts to re-engage Sadie in school life despite her spending weeks at a time off school. It would appear this lack of interest in Sadie as a pupil directly affected her learner identity; in a poignant

statement, Sadie explains she would like someone at school to help her identify what she is good at academically, rather than highlight her deficiencies (Furlong, 2004, in Robb *et al.*, 2007): "Like you're *good* at that and you… you would achieve higher standards doing that."

With limited knowledge of what was available in terms of education routes or what she may be suited to, Sadie's 'back-up' plan for her future was in hair and beauty (Archer *et al.*, 2005). She viewed this as an 'easier', non-academic route to employment and her attitude to learning throughout Year 10 and part of Year 11 reflected this along with her assumption that her sister's contacts would ensure she would gain employment on completing her education at 16. Having a 'fall back' option is something Sadie has considered carefully, not something she viewed as a failure, but rather being realistic about what she could achieve (Andres *et al.*, 1999) having listened to her parents' advice:

> … you've got to have something to fall back on and just telling us like about – like me dad, this was the other day, he was telling us what he had wanted to do with his life. He was like, "it didn't go all right", and he was geet, "but if I had planned it this way and had of done this and that, then it would've went right". He was like, "you need to concentrate on what you want to do, get your money and don't get into debt" [Sadie].

In this way, Sadie's aspirations are influenced heavily by her awareness of the employment experiences of both her father and sister; her father ran his own taxi firm but this business failed (reason not divulged by Sadie) and her sister was self-employed, but made Sadie aware of the long hours worked and lack of financial reward. This made Sadie reluctant to aim for any 'high risk' aspirations which may involve the possibility of failure or financial crisis.

The key driver to all her aspirations is to earn a good wage and become rich. However, while Sadie recognises her own strengths and skills in hair, beauty and fashion, she is being told that this is not a career in which she will be financially rewarded:

> Me sister had her own business and stuff, and she's saying there's not much money in it. Me sister's friend – who I did me work experience with – she says 'Sadie, there's not much money in it at all' […] And then me mam was like 'you've got to have loads of money behind you to start your own business' and stuff [Sadie].

At the same time, her immediate family also tell her that she *should* be aspiring to a well-paid job, yet they do not appear to be knowledgeable about educational options, subsequent employment and earning potential. They have not discussed potential alternatives in any detail nor what she can expect to earn; indeed, it appears Sadie's

understanding of what it is to 'be rich' is based in celebrity culture, in the magazines she reads about pop stars, footballers' wives etc:

> Cheryl Tweedy [popstar] is from round here and you think 'that could be me' […] There's this boy at our school – he's a really good footballer [and] he's had scouts from Liverpool who want him, scouts from Sunderland. I told him I'm going to be his wife! [Sadie]

Her aspiration to 'be famous and rich' in the earlier part of the research, which is largely based on media representations of female celebrity lifestyles, has skewed her expectations regarding earning potential should she not realise this particular aspiration; for example, when asked what she would like to earn from employment, Sadie said she would like to earn £60-100,000pa. While on the surface Sadie appears to show an awareness of the financial implications of running your own business and aspires to a high wage, this is based entirely upon information from her father, mother and sister, and she lacks any knowledge about particular professions and their associated income.

It is a strong attachment to place, reflected in this bonding social capital, which offers Sadie both strength and weakness in achieving her employment aspirations. Despite concerns reported in literature about the negative effects of bonding social capital (Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007), it is Sadie's close family which provides the support and careers guidance lacking at school, and family and friends who offer role models for Sadie's future employment prospects. Whilst the presence of bonding rather than bridging social capital might be criticised for limiting young people's horizons, for Sadie, the strong relationships based in her local area (Nayak, 2003) provided the only means of inspiration available to her at this time in her life; as her sister states, "I think it's always a good thing to have a supportive family round you. I think we would encourage her no matter what, no matter". However, without exposure to opportunities and lifestyles different to her own through larger social networks, Sadie is disadvantaged by a lack of awareness of what else is available in the labour market (Ball, 2003). Sadie is equally unaware of the job opportunities available to her in her chosen career; when asked if she knew anything about the job market for flight attendants in the region, she replied "Nah".

Ultimately, Sadie gains a great deal of emotional support from her immediate family relationships and she values this over any external emotional support or guidance (i.e. from peers, school) *(Ball and Vincent, 1998).* Sadie discusses her relationship with her sister as particularly influential (Rutherford, Wager and Netto, 2003) in developing who she is as a person and gaining advice from her sister's own education and employment experiences to inform her future decisions:

...the beauty thing that I really wanted to do was get me shop like her, because I wanted to follow in her footsteps...which was because she influenced us down the shop, and I always used to help out. [...] She's like, if I'm doing something wrong or something, she's like 'get back on track'... at school if I need help with something, she'll be like 'have you done it?' [...] She's like me best friend, I really trust her... [Sadie]

Sadie's sister feels her mother occasionally finds it difficult to guide Sadie in terms of her education and employment opportunities, partly due to her being young when she started her own family therefore lacking experience on which to base her advice. She suggests her role in Sadie's life is in part a result of this, using her younger viewpoint and more extensive employment experience to 'fill the gaps' sometimes left by their mothers' lack of knowledge regarding education and employment. Sadie's data has shown that this both creates and restricts the education and employment possibilities available to her as she relies upon her mother, father and sister for information, which is not always accurate or extensive.
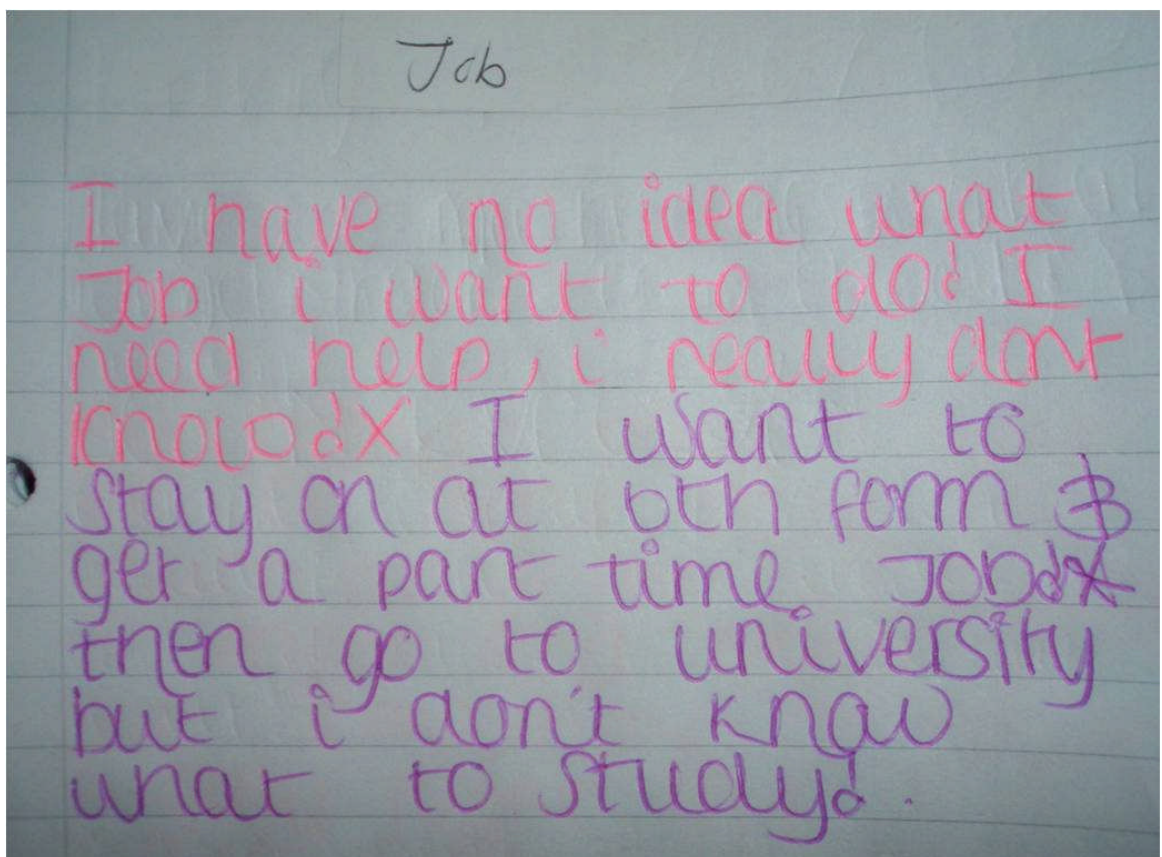
Figure 5: Excerpt from Sadie's memory book. Her future employment: "I have no idea what job I want to do! I need help, I really don't know! x I want to stay on at 6th form and get a part time job then go to university but I don't know what to study!"

This is despite Sadie's own admissions about lacking the knowledge she needs about the range of future educational options available and her feeling 'lost' as a result; examples included:

"Like when you mentioned GNVQs – I haven't got a clue what they are."

> "I would go to either university or college, I don't know what first – probably university, I'd go straight to university. Or have you got to go to college first?"
> "Like you just don't know where you're going and you feel like totally lost and thick (laughs) because you haven't got a clue." [Sadie].

Such statements were often followed with questions aimed at me, with Sadie seeking verification of information she had heard or an area she knows nothing about; requests from Sadie for further information about educational pathways, examinations, qualifications, college, and higher education became commonplace from the second session of data collection onwards as the researcher-participant relationship developed (perhaps as she viewed me as a mentor) and she recognised the potential for gaining information from a person with experience within post-16 education (Raffo, 2006). It is unclear whether Sadie placed value upon the information she received but the fact she continued to request it may reflect the worth she attached to it.

Sadie's sister helps clarify the options available to her following her choice to pursue Travel and Tourism at college, trying to ensure Sadie remains realistic about what she needs to achieve in the longer term.

> We talked about college and stuff, and I asked you what you were going to do and that. You said beauty and stuff, and I tried to put you off that […] We'd said, hadn't we, with travel and tourism you can open your options, can't you? You can go into like air hostessing, she can go into repping, she could go into travel agents – she could do call centre work even, if that's what she wanted to do [Sister].

She believed Sadie had a greater range of possible employment opportunities available to her e.g. flight attendant, a travel rep, or a travel agent if she studied Travel and Tourism at college. This area of work also incorporates Sadie's focus on self-image[17], particularly if she did pursue becoming a member of cabin crew with their strict codes of dress and make-up; in this way, her sister had built on her in-depth knowledge of Sadie's interests and skills, then offered a realistic alternative which would combine her wish to leave school with her existing competencies. Both Sadie and her sister felt this individual interest in and support of her education was deficient at Sadie's school; "the sheer lack of support" was identified by both as critical to Sadie's attitude towards school, her lack of motivation and her sometimes directionless aspirations (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a). Her sister hoped her enrolment in college would be supported by an interested staff member who guided Sadie through her FE experience, offered advice on course related issues but also gave Sadie someone to approach with general enquiries about her future education and employment.

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[17] Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth's (2007) hyper-heterosexualised femininity relied on girls making a substantial investment in their appearance in order to look glamorous, desirable and heterosexual.

Sadie had assumed Connexions (through her school) would have given her the guidance she required in terms of her choices around education and employment, but she was not given the opportunity to engage with the service until 5 weeks prior to the end of Year 11, despite the fact she intimated that she felt she would have benefited from their support in Year 9 while she was choosing her GCSE options. However, once Sadie met with her Connexions Personal Adviser (PA), she felt the process was very useful, giving her the advice and practical support she needed to choose her college course and enrol:

> I just told her [what I wanted to do] and she just had her – you know the catalogues you get with loads of information? – And she was just reading about them. Then she told us about all the courses and stuff and then… I decided really […] and then she printed off the forms and she helped go through them, and then she sent them away for us and stuff [Sadie].

Significantly, the information and guidance offered by the Connexions PA about the course and subsequent employment opportunities was similar to that already given to Sadie by her sister; perhaps Sadie would have been less open and accepting of advice suggesting she pursue a course or career not considered by her or discussed previously with her sister. It is difficult to suggest that an earlier appointment with Connexions, say during Year 10 at the height of Sadie's truancy, would have had the same impact upon her motivation and choice of educational pathway. It is possible to suggest that engaging with a Connexions PA in Year 9 prior to her GCSE choices, or a school staff member showing an interest in her skills and supporting her ambitions may have helped Sadie make important educational choices, maintained her engagement with school and developed a more positive learner identity.

There was little difference between Sadie's aspirations at the end of the research compared with the outset. During our last session together, I asked Sadie to map out her future along a timeline (see figure 6); despite her decision to pursue the Travel and Tourism course, this did not appear on her timeline nor any aspiration to gain employment as a flight attendant, which raises questions regarding her commitment to either choice.
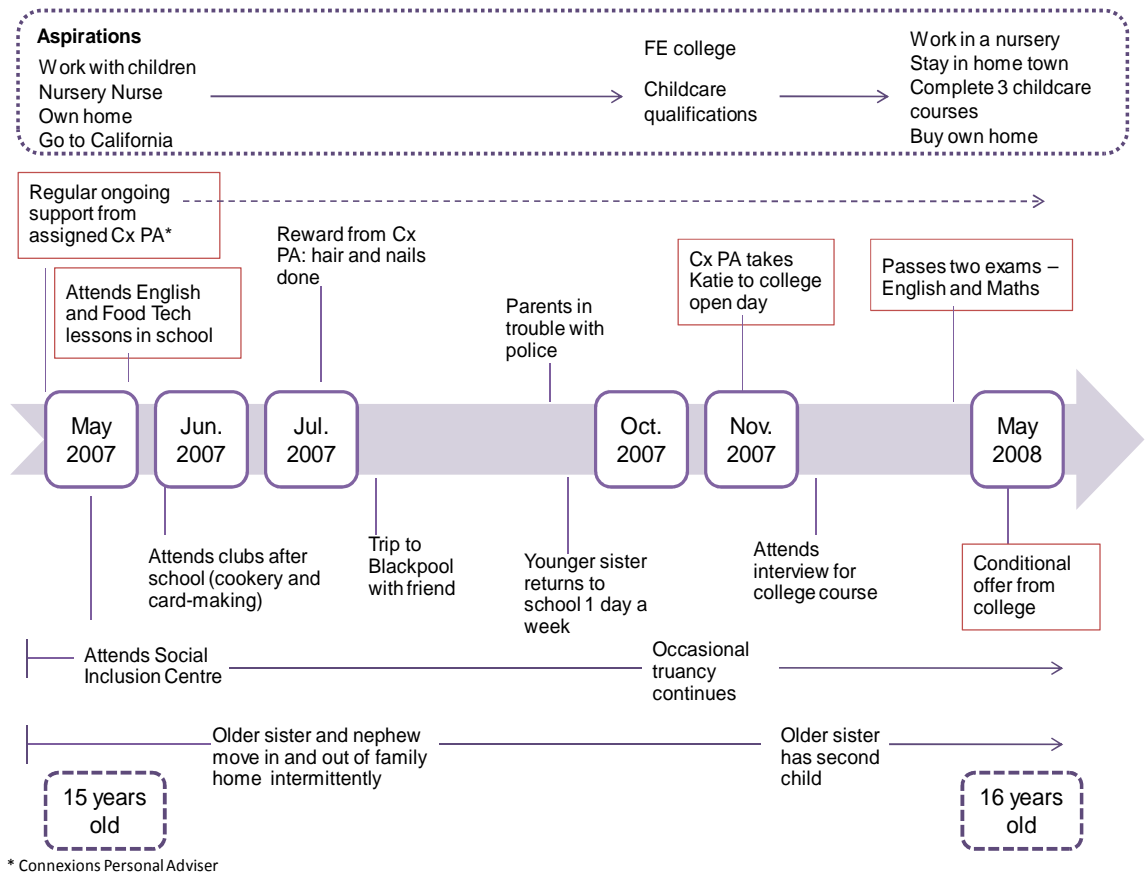
Figure 6: Sadie's aspirations

4.2.2 Carley

Figure 7: Carley's biographical timeline

Carley, in the same school year as Sadie, was engaged in the research via her Connexions PA in early 2007. This key contact was very important in securing Carley's participation as she was, at that stage, completely disengaged from mainstream schooling and very reluctant to engage with new people. In the initial stages of research, Carley appeared shy and uncomfortable with being the centre of attention as research participant. She described her aspirations as wanting to be a nursery nurse, to live in a big home on her own and to go to California. These aspirations did not change in the period Carley engaged as a participant, rather she took the steps she felt were necessary to realise these aspirations. The intensive one-to-one support and guidance of her Connexions PA and the educational support of her school's Social Inclusion (SI) Worker enabled the key pieces to be put into place in Carley's journey.

With no family member in employment and her reluctance to share her future plans with her family, Carley did not have a role model at home and lacked informed guidance from home about educational choices. However, as the research progressed, she did discuss the effect of seeing her older sister engaged in the benefits system; Carley's aspirations were in part desired and pursued *because of* the examples she observed within her family of not getting qualifications and being unemployed. Whilst Sadie appears to follow the pathway laid out for her by virtue of her family's guidance and lack of school support, Carley's pathway through education and her aspirations for employment illustrate her own agency in action, albeit encouraged by an intensive support structure, in spite of her lack of family role model, deprivation in the local area and poor school experiences.

Carley lived in a rural location in the South of the region. She lives with her mother (unemployed), her step-father (unemployed), two younger sisters (the youngest in full time education, the other is NEET), and older sister (unemployed) and her daughter. She has an older step-brother (unemployed), an older step-sister and step-nephew; it is not clear whether they live in the family home permanently, but they stay over regularly. Carley never referred to her biological father. Her grandmother lives in the next village and visits every Sunday for lunch. Carley's best friend, aged 40, lives across the road with her two children, and Carley often stays at her house at the weekend. Carley's friendship group is based around her neighbourhood and her family. She spends a great deal of time outside of school socialising with her younger sister (aged 11) or her older sister (aged 20) and her friends; she did not indicate having friends of her own age, which seemed to stem from her disengagement from school. During this leisure time, she stays within the neighbourhood, very occasionally travelling to the nearest city by bus to go shopping with family members. While Carley spends a lot of time at home and regularly helps her

mother with domestic chores, she does not appear comfortable with 'being herself' at home in front of her family. She explained she was quiet at home, kept her feelings and opinions to herself and supported her family when they needed it. Living with two younger sisters, having a young nephew and baby niece, and often helping with domestic chores, Carley's role at home is a matriarchal one, which is something she also emulates at her best friend's home in regularly looking after her children. Her enjoyment of looking after young children is reflected in her aspiration to work in a nursery and pursuing a childcare qualification.

The stories of Carley and Sadie show that being categorised in a particular way can effect distribution of educational resources, access to appropriate opportunities and support, and ultimately influence educational routes to employment. While Sadie's occasional 'skiving' left her labelled as truant, Carley's complete disengagement from schooling, often physically struggling with her mother as she tried to get Carley into the school building, meant she was categorised as 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) (Skopalová, 2010). Carley's disengagement began in Year 7 (she had a positive primary school experience) where she was bullied by her peers ("Calling us names and stuff") due to her physical appearance: "I was getting picked on in year 7 so I stayed off for a while. When I came back to school, to the Unit, I just wouldn't go to me lessons." (Carley). Whilst she was not comfortable discussing this further, Carley's Connexion PA and SI (Social Inclusion) Worker (she was the only participant to refuse the participation of any family member) were both able to shed further light on the bullying Carley endured and its subsequent impact upon her.

> She just refused to go into any lessons, which meant that she'd been spending a lot of time in here, in the Unit. They'd also obviously had bullying issues with her and, I know when I've spoken to her mam, she thinks that was a big issue to be honest. That's probably why she stopped coming to school [Connexions PA].

Both her Connexions PA and Social Inclusion (SI) Worker suggested the bullying centred on Carley's physical appearance, including her weight and personal hygiene. Most of Year 7 and Year 8 was spent at home. In Year 9, the SI Worker engaged Carley as a pupil in the Social Inclusion Unit (SIU), which was on school premises but separate from the school itself; this offered a 'halfway house', a stepping stone for support staff to try and reengage Carley with the curriculum within the safety of the Unit away from her bullies, yet with guided learning opportunities and eventually the opportunity to study for her GCSEs. Her attendance at the Unit was not regular at first, but being there was a huge achievement for Carley. Carley was also designated a Connexions PA for personal support work. This support network in Year 10 and 11 helped Carley to attend the SIU and then return to mainstream schooling for three GCSE subject lessons. This trusting

relationship between Carley and her Connexions PA in particular enabled her achievement of three GCSE qualifications and enrolment at a local FE college to study childcare.

Carley's aspirations for employment did not change during the research period; "I'd like to work with children, 0-5 year olds […] About when I'm 20", preferably as a nursery nurse. Initially, she did not connect this aspiration for her future career with any associated educational aspirations; as the research progressed, her re-engagement with school and her relationship with her Connexions PA supported her to develop a detailed picture of the potential educational pathway required to achieve her nursery nurse aspiration. Despite her negative school experiences and previous NEET status, Carley was not deterred by the further education necessary to realise this aspiration, which is perhaps partly due to her sustaining a generally positive learner identity (Rees *et al.*, 2006; Raphael Reed, Gates and Last, 2007), with her non-attendance due to bullying rather than poor academic self-concept (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). She recognised that she needed to pursue her career and earn a wage if she were to realise her second main aspiration - to own her own home. Carley's perceived self-efficacy (her belief that her actions would produce effects i.e. achieve her aspirations) was strong, which was mainly attributed to the verbal encouragement given by her SI Worker and Connexions PA (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004).

This transformation occurred over time; at the mid-stage, her decision to consider college as an option was a reflection of the immediate alternative available if she did not:

> Well, [Connexions PA] said would I go to college and like I said I don't really think so, but then […] then I changed me mind and said I probably would go to college, because it's better than sitting in the house all day like [Carley].

Carley did not like the idea of "going on the dole", having observed the reality of the benefits system through her family's experience ("I would try and get a job, before I went on the dole"). In this sense, Carley's aspirations were borne of her understanding of what she did *not* want her life to be like. Her knowledge of the benefits system and seeing firsthand the experiences of her mother, step-father and older siblings appears to have deterred Carley from following the same route, which is something Carley feels a number of young people in her local area aspire to:

> A lot them aren't bothered what their lives are like really. When they're younger, they're not bothered what their lives are like […] From like 13 onwards …like there's…a majority of people who don't think nowt about their future […] Yeah, they just don't seem to care […] that's the way people like think sometimes, that they can go on the dole, it's simple, and not get a job and that [Carley]

Carley's aspirations to pursue further education, seek a career in nursery nursing and purchase her own property do not reflect what might be expected of a young person from her locality, family background and school experience (see Andres et al, 1999; Craddock et al 2007). In this sense, Carley appears to embody 'the aspirational' as envisaged by government policy (DCSF, 2007a), not only in harbouring aspirations for education and employment, but also in seeking to achieve social mobility; she intends to pursue a route not taken by any of her family, to continue through post-16 education, gain employment and become a home owner-occupier. Whilst the additional support offered through her school was key to her reengagement in education and helped develop her aspirations for employment, Carley demonstrated reflexivity in her acknowledgment that she did not want to follow the family role models available to her and she acted upon this to create an alternative future for herself (see Goldthorpe's rational choice theory, 1996, in Andres *et al.*, 1999). The support staff played a particularly important role in filling the gap in information, advice, guidance and positive role models left by her family relationships.

The relationship between Carley and her Connexions PA developed over a two year period and offered her an opportunity to have a voice, be heard and gain self-respect while also observing a positive working role model. Carley described her Connexions PA as "quite a good role model" because she treats her clients kindly and listens to what they say. Her PA hoped Carley might look to her as a working role model as "…a working woman who's got a family and you know, I'm juggling a family, home life and work and… hopefully she'd sort of aspire to that". Their sessions offered Carley a chance to talk, share her thoughts and feelings, something which was not available to her at home:

> She's much quieter as well, when you see the rest of the family, they're all quite…um… I mean [her younger sister is] lovely as well … but they're much more kind of fierce about the world whereas Carley is very introvert about it [SI Worker].

Carley found it difficult to pinpoint why she felt unable or unwilling to share her thoughts and feelings more with her family:

> **…**because I don't talk… why, if I talk to [mother], but I don't talk to her much. I don't talk much […] Yeah, I don't talk about stuff at home much
> **… why?**
> I don't know really [Carley].

The SI Worker shared her concerns regarding the longer term support Carley would need from her family once she began studies at college and questioned whether her family relationships would be able to offer this:

> …you know her family haven't known anything like this before so as proud as they are, I don't know whether they'll be able to support her as much as she needs to. And I think, the travelling to college will be a big tester for her because it will mean she has to do it herself […]… and you have that influence of everybody else just

sitting in and 'ah, I could just stay in today'. So, but it will be a real challenge for her to keep herself as motivated as she has this year (SI Worker).

The ongoing assistance offered by her Connexions PA, which will be available until Carley is 19 (although not in such an intensive manner), will support her through this transition.

Carley benefitted greatly from the educational and personal support provided by her school's Social Inclusion Unit and Connexions Service respectively. Resources and information not available to her through her family relationships were provided via this intervention; when comparing Carley's experience with Sadie's, Sadie's reliance on information provided through the 'local grapevine' (mainly her older sister) was not always accurate, did not set out clear pathways to follow and, importantly, did not always reflect her own aspirations. The relationship which developed between Carley and her Connexions PA over the two year period meant her PA was able to understand Carley's life in context, what she aspired to achieve and how Connexions might support this. However, in the first instance, the Connexions PA had to overcome Carley's reluctance and shyness, using less formal ways in which to establish a relationship based in trust and individual interest in Carley;

> When I first met her, she would hardly look at us […] … I think, as it went on, just sitting doing her nails and somebody taking a *personal interest* in her was a big thing for her because I don't think she probably ever had anybody asking her what she wanted to do – or even, even looking after her, maybe even [Connexions PA].

This personal interest was vital; it was important that her PA was female, approximately the same age as her own mother and able to respond to her in a less formal and caring way (for example, treating her to manicures which she undertook herself). The Connexions PA was from the region, of a working class background and this established some common ground from which to build on (Raffo, 2006).

Carley's reliance upon her Connexions PA and SI Worker became a concern as she came to the end of Year 11 and prepared to move onto college. Although it had been envisaged the Connexions Service would build her self-esteem to the point where she was ready to "move on" independently (Connexions PA), towards the end of Year 11 Carley still relied heavily upon this support:

> …it's like softly, softly with Carley – you have to *take* her to college (laugh) – I've had to get her to fill in the form, I've had to send it off for her, I've had to take her for her interview. And then *hope* that next year she actually goes to college [Connexions PA].

However, this practical support was very important to Carley as she had explained to her PA her mother would not have visited the college with her nor would she know how to fill

in the necessary forms for college enrolment. Her Connexions PA was concerned for Carley once she leaves school for college, that she will not have the support of her family and may find it difficult to maintain her motivation without this. However, she hoped the work they had already done to that point would give Carley the grounding she needed to achieve her aspirations, through her own determination, alongside additional support structures provided through the college:

> …she probably will need that support, and I'm hoping we've got her to the point where she's self-motivated enough to get herself out of bed and realise that's what she's got to do to get a good job and maybe get herself out of the area that she's living in as well. And make something of herself, I think. And I think she, I think she wants to – I hope she will […] I think she probably will be ok, because I think she is quietly determined so I do think she will [Connexions PA].

The consistency of support offered by the package described, including her Food Tech teacher, meant little change for Carley from Years 7 – 11; the SI Worker comments on this:

> I think every student is different, but I think for Carley, continuity is very important, and I think the person is really important. She needs familiar ground, she needs to build the relationship, and it takes her a while to do that [SI Worker].

The changes already brought about in Carley's self-esteem and confidence affirmed her positive learner identity and had a great impact upon her belief in her ability to realise her educational aspirations (her self-efficacy): "…now she is so strong-willed and independent that I think she's now at the point that if she needs help, she will ask for it" [SI Worker].

Once she knew she could achieve, this boosted her confidence further:

> …she could get the good grades in her English coursework, and to have that feedback from the teachers, to say 'well done and you have really done well with this' – yes, that boosted her confidence no end […] I think that because she thought she could achieve, she didn't see why she shouldn't go further. I think it's just building her confidence, it took a long time to do that, it was little step by little step to build her confidence [SI Worker].

Carley herself was able to identify this link between her confidence and subsequent changes this brought about; here she refers to her Connexions PA: "She's em… done quite a lot actually. She's, em, made us more confident…type. Em… she's helped us get back into lessons as well and… she's helped us go to college too". In terms of Carley's educational aspirations, whilst much of the action occurred in Year 11, with Carley visiting and enrolling in college, the turning point identified by her SI Worker was much earlier, in Year 9:

> It seemed to be at the end of year 9 when she realised how well she'd done in her SATs and I think she realised then 'if I'd been at school, I would have probably done a lot better – I've done well, but I would have probably done a lot better' […] And I think that was the turning point for her, and her attitude changed completely

once she'd picked the [GCSE] options. And she was very focused then on what she wanted to do and attended [school] quite well really [SI Worker].

Again, praise for her SATs results from staff members who were already significant to and respected by Carley left her in no doubt about her educational ability and resulted in her decision to aim to realise her aspirations (Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995). With information, advice and guidance, Carley made the appropriate links between her educational achievement, commitment to succeed and realising her employment aspirations; "She knows that's what she's got to do if she wants to work with children. Maybes (sic) there's an acceptance there that that's what I've got to do." [Connexions PA].

From Year 9 onwards, her growing confidence, boosted by the support package in school, good SAT results and teacher praise, encouraged her to attend lessons, which in turn further developed her self-esteem, with rewards from her Connexions PA to affirm her achievements. Carley describes the impact of part of this process upon her decision to enrol at a further education college:

> I think what made us want to go….like want to like think about college was when I started to go to me English and [Food] Tech lessons… Because I think what I was thinking was if I can go into them, I can go to college [Carley].

This journey was catalogued in her memory book; moving from very little mention of school activities at the height of her truancy (figures 8 and 9) through to going into school to undertake extracurricular activities (figures 10 and 11).
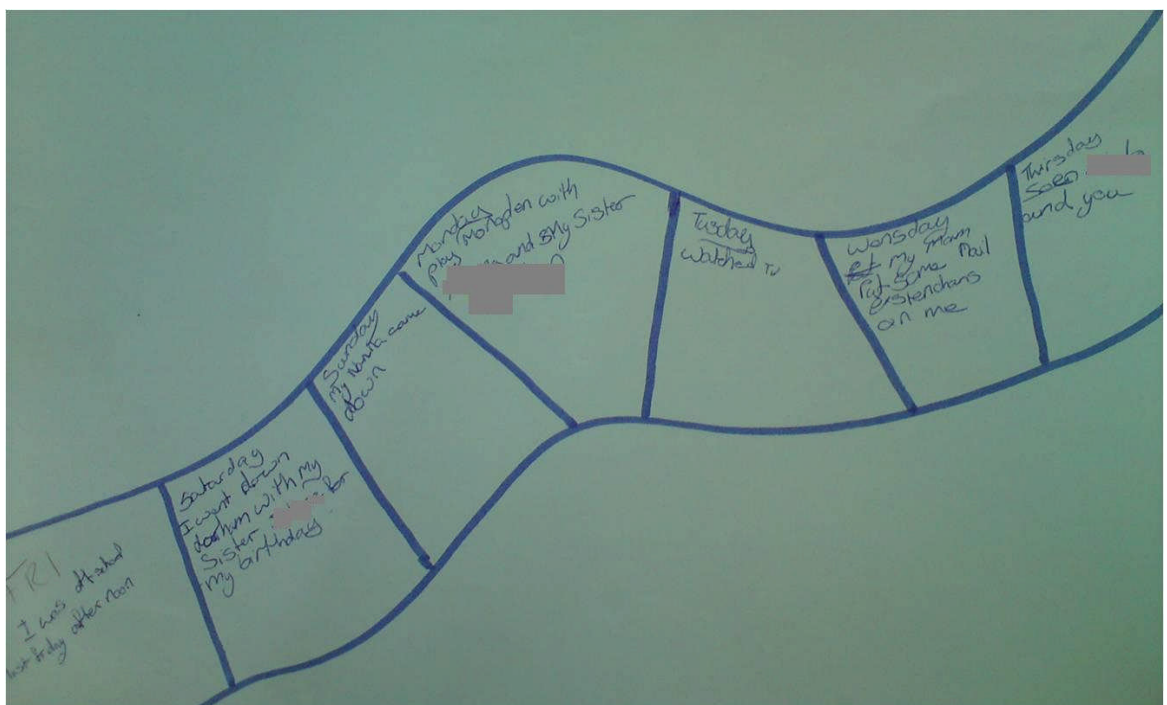
Figure 8: Carley: a weekly activity chart. "I was off school last Friday afternoon; Saturday I went down Durham with my sister for my birthday; Sunday my Nana came down; Monday play monopoly with [friend] and my sister; Tuesday watched TV; Wednesday my mam put some nail extensions on me; Thursday seen [Connexions PA] and you [researcher]."
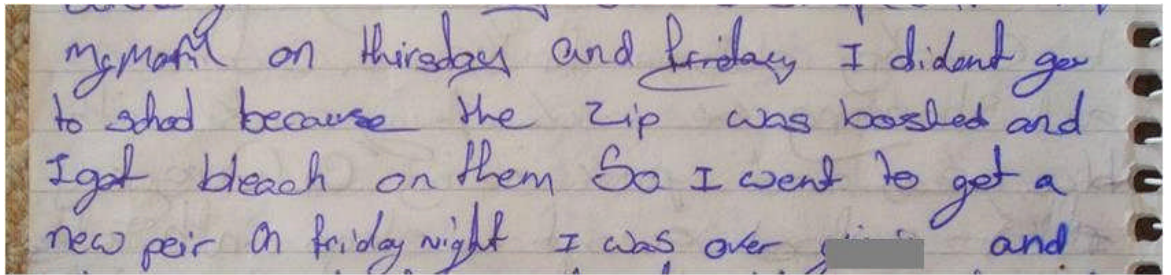
Figure 9: Excerpt from Carley's memory book: "On Thursday and Friday I didn't go to school because the zip was bashed and I got bleach on them [her school trousers] so I went to get a new pair on Friday night."
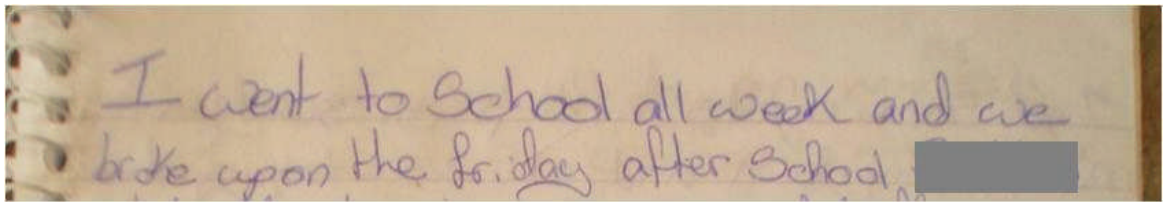
Figure 10: Excerpt from Carley's memory book: "I went to school all week and we broke up on the Friday after school."
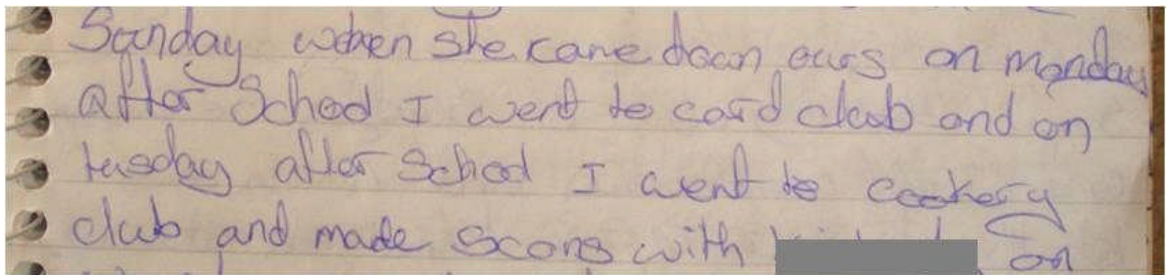
Figure 11: Excerpt from Carley's memory book: "On Monday after school I went to card club and on Tuesday after school I went to cookery club and made scones with [friend]."

This process enabled Carley to consider educational routes otherwise barred for her had she not gained the appropriate qualifications. She describes her subsequent growing confidence as playing its part in her return to education:

> **Do you feel more confident?**
> (Nods) Yeah […] I'm more confident… confidenter (sic) since I've been going to lessons. Because before I wouldn't even go out the [Social Inclusion] Unit for playtime or lunchtime but now I do sometimes
> **Is that something that's come from yourself or has [Cx PA] helped you do that?**
> (Pause) Well, [Cx PA] was geet telling us to go to me lessons. I wasn't listening to her at first like. Because at first I was geet putting it off because like… but then I just like went in [Carley].

This comment is all the more poignant when considering how strongly Carley felt about not returning to education, which is reflected in her willingness not only to attend school during normal hours but also to attend after school clubs and to complete course work:
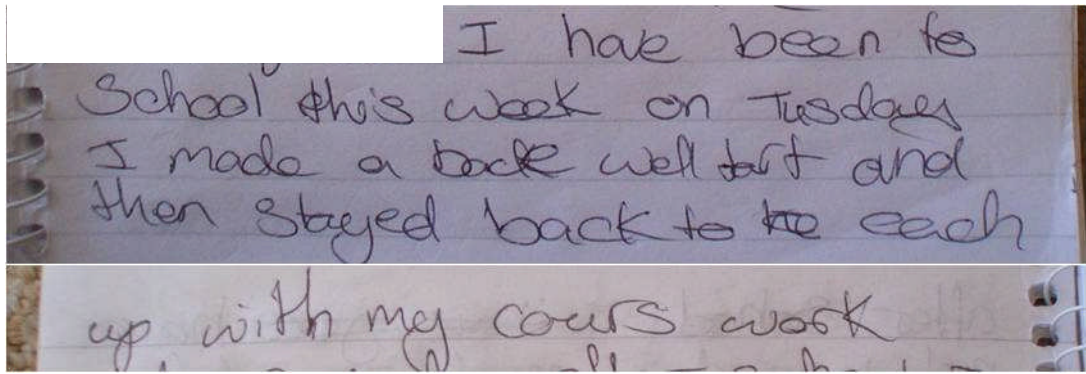
Figure 12: Excerpt from Carley's memory book: "I have been to school this week. On Tuesday I made a bakewell tart and then stayed back to catch up with my course work."

From her categorisation as NEET in Years 7, 8 and most of 9, Carley's journey during the research period resulted in her enrolment in FE college, an enormous feat for a young woman with few resources or opportunities, but for the crucial provision of a personalised support package over an extended period. It was very important the support package developed for Carley continued to provide the opportunities and resources she required to realise those educational aspirations throughout Years 10 and 11. It is difficult to comment upon her family's attitude to her educational achievement and aspirations for employment given Carley did not want any of her family to contribute to the research. If her mother is as proud of Carley's achievements as her Connexions PA and SI Worker suggest, this emotional support will be important to Carley in her pursuit of her aspirations; however, she will continue to require the official information, advice and guidance offered by more formal organisations, such as Connexions and college, in order to make decisions about courses, modules, placements etc.

4.3   Charlotte and Val: 'Critical incidents' and aspiration trajectories

The stories of Charlotte and Val offer an insight into how 'critical incidents' (positive or negative, expected or unforeseen) can have a significant impact upon a young person's developing aspirations and their trajectory. Whilst Charlotte and Val share some characteristics (including family composition and faith), there are key differences in their experiences which account for some significant challenges to their aspirations; for Charlotte, this is in the shape of changes to stereotypical female role models, whilst Val faced disappointment regarding work experience. Indeed, judging on face value, one may expect Val to 'succeed' in fulfilling the role advocated by recent government policy around raising aspirations and pursuing social mobility (e.g. her attendance at a Catholic school, intact family with employed role model, supportive and caring home environment, excellent academic record, engagement with extra-curricular activities etc). However, as

her journey will show, these expectations of what she should aspire to alongside what may appear as a small event to outsiders can have a crushing impact upon a young person's aspirations. In Charlotte's case, her ethnic heritage as Gypsy Traveller may lead to assumptions about her educational and employment trajectory (as a young female Traveller, she will leave school around 12 years old, marry young and fulfil a role at home). However, her journey will illustrate the impact of larger societal changes (recession, employment opportunities etc) and the effects of an external intervention designed to advocate on behalf of a traditionally discriminated group. The mothers of Charlotte and Val guide their aspirations more than any other source of information, advice or support: for Charlotte this has an affirming influence as her mother becomes employed during the research period, a very rare occurrence for Gypsy Traveller women; for Val this has a limiting effect as her mother, although supportive, does not offer ideas for alternative employment routes following disappointment in trying to realise a particular career aspiration.
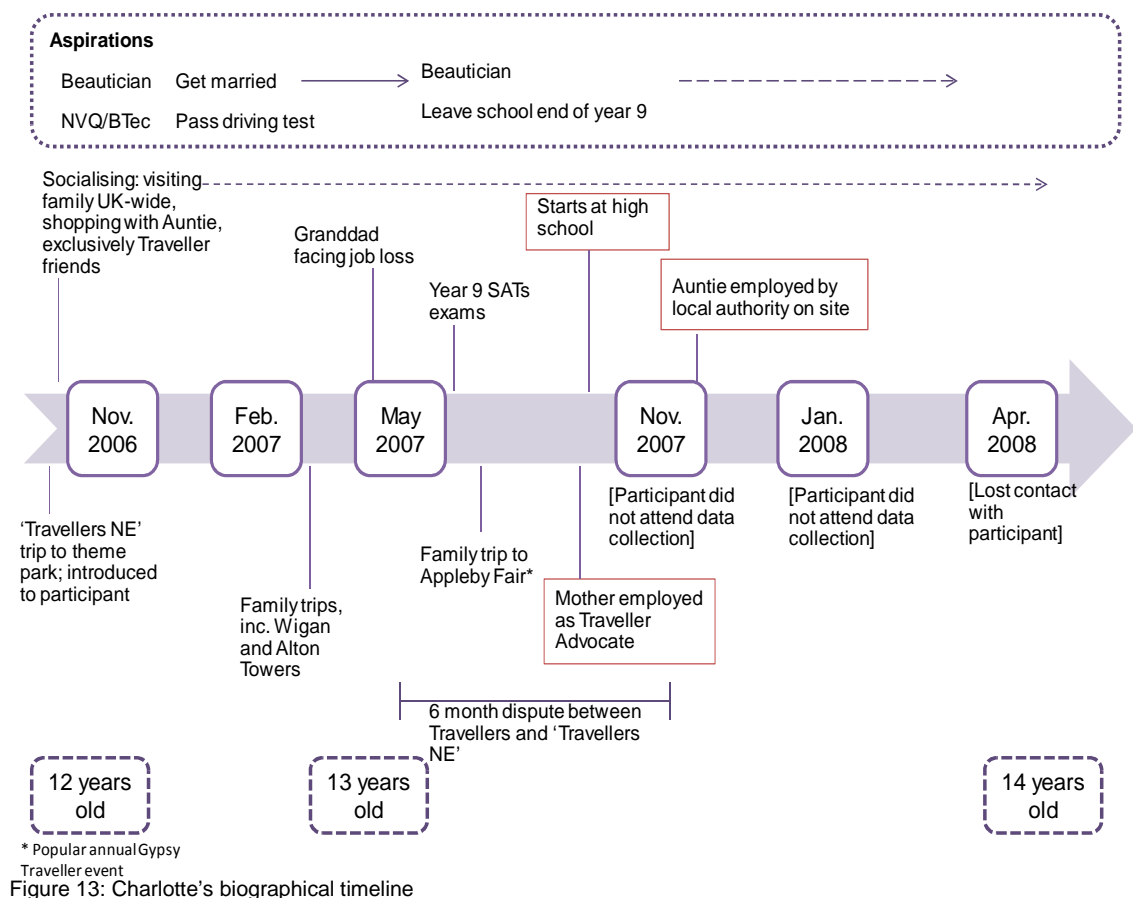
4.3.1 Charlotte

Figure 13: Charlotte's biographical timeline

Charlotte was 12 years old when I first met her on a trip to a theme park organised by 'Travellers North East'[18]. Her attitude and interaction with me suggested she was older than her years; she was amiable and open in the presence of her friends and Project Workers, and was happy to participate in my research. From the midpoint of research onwards, it became increasingly difficult to engage Charlotte in the research process[19]. Data from Charlotte does offer a significant insight into her developing aspirations at a particularly important time in her life, but as a reflection of her disengagement, it is limited and does not include data from her 'significant others' (see chapter 3, Methodology). As a result, I use data from both Project Workers to fill any gaps where appropriate.

Charlotte lived on a fixed site in a rural location in the North of the region; local amenities were limited, public transport links poor and the position of the site made outdoor activities difficult and unsafe for children. As a fixed site, electricity and water was available. She lived in a trailer with her mother (initially unemployed then in employment), father (self-employed) and younger sister (by three years); the family had two trailers, the second was for the children to play in. Her auntie, uncle and three younger cousins lived in two trailers next door; her grandparents also lived on site, in a chalet. For the most part, Charlotte's family did not access any of the local amenities and would travel by car to reach services, shops etc. As a female, Charlotte was not allowed off site on her own ("I'm not allowed to wander") unlike her male counterparts and tended to go out with her mother and/or Auntie. She attended a local middle school, which was the only occasion on which she would socialise with gorgios[20]; although she described some of her school peers as friends, she did not see them outside of school. Living on a fixed site gave Charlotte more stability with regards to her education than Travellers who do not: "We stay on here 10 months, 9 months of the year" (Charlotte). Her school attendance record was reflective of her Traveller lifestyle, but was largely good; this illustrates the importance her family placed on education as usually it would be early in middle school (or the transition to secondary school for two tier systems) when their attendance drops:

> ...when they're in middle school they realise they're looking at doing academic work towards a future. I think that's when they start...You find that attendance

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[18] This is the charity-run advocacy project for Gypsy/Travellers in the North East of England; the project has been anonymised and will be referred to as 'Travellers North East' throughout. My engagement with Charlotte relied upon two Project Workers at Travellers North East; they helped to negotiate access with two fixed Traveller sites in the region, then invited me to this theme park visit to introduce myself to the young people they worked with.

[19] Initially this was due to the 6 month dispute occurring between two Traveller sites in the region and the charity managing Travellers North East; unfortunately this continued to impact upon my role as researcher as I had made initial contact through this charity and continued to be considered as an outsider. The situation was exacerbated by one of the Project Workers leaving the charity for another post and she had been my main point of contact on site. Whilst I was able to arrange dates to meet with Charlotte for data collection, on two occasions she did not attend and then stopped responding to phone calls, letters etc.

[20] A term used by Travellers to describe members of the settled community

records from middle school start to dwindle. I would say very few attend 50% of the year, you know [Project Worker 1].

Charlotte's experience of schooling was largely mainstream. In addition to the usual school subjects/lessons, a Traveller Education Service (TES) teacher did visit the school (the same TES teacher who had taught her mother) and worked with her and fellow Traveller pupils; this was restricted to school hours and on school property only, no site visits were allowed.

During our first session, she described her aspirations as staying on at school until she was 16, training as a beautician at college, running her own beauty business, getting married at 21, and wanting to pass her driving test (figure 14 shows some of these aspirations).
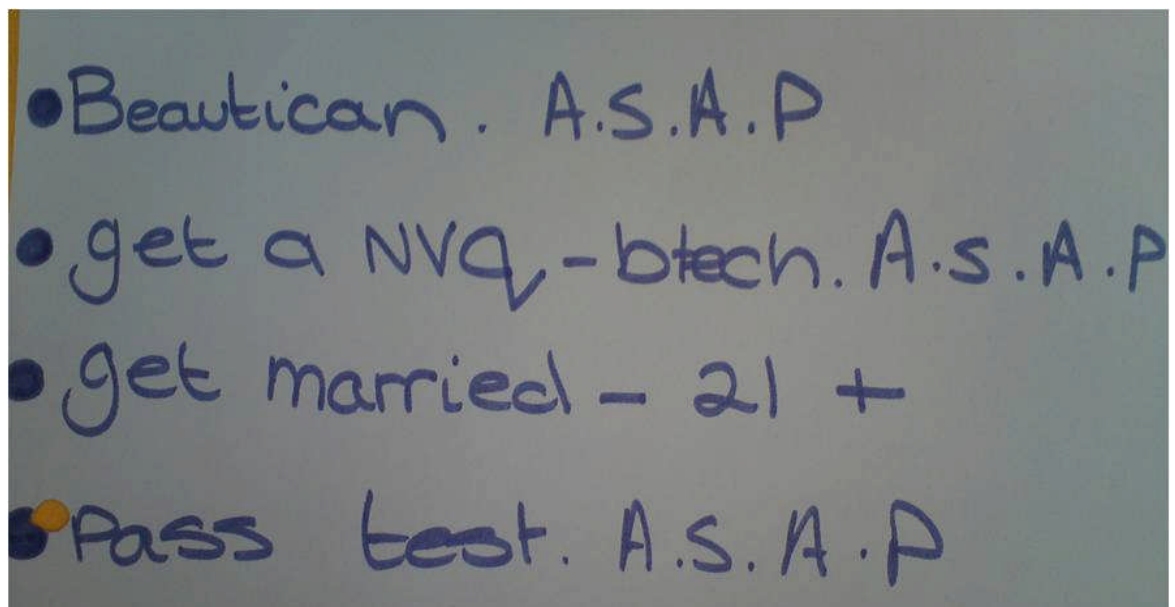
Figure 14: Charlotte's aspirations: "Beautician. ASAP; get a NVQ – btech. ASAP; get married – 21+; pass [driving] test. ASAP."

The expected trajectory of a female Traveller like Charlotte would be to leave school by age 12, to hone her existing skills of looking after the home and any younger children, and to marry early (21 would be old by Traveller standards) and bear children. As Project Worker 1 explains, "they bring them out into their community to basically learn skills, so they're learning skills about…basically babysitting peers and younger siblings. They end up cleaning trailers like their mothers do". Charlotte explains her expected route as a female Traveller does not require formal education:

> …they only have a cleaning job, and like it's something that you don't need a degree for. Do you know what I mean?
> **If you did leave school, what would you do after that?**
> Stay home and clean up [Charlotte].

On reflection, all of Charlotte's stated aspirations are outside of expected norms for her culture and continued to challenge Traveller traditions until she disengaged from the research. I did consider the possibility that my position as an 'outsider' may have influenced Charlotte's stated aspirations during our initial data collection session; for example, her wanting to challenge my predisposed expectations of her as a Traveller. However, the subsequent data collected from Charlotte shows this to be untrue as she had given consideration to *how* she would achieve her aspirations. She discussed her plans to attend college, about the level of qualification she would need, and shared her aim to set up her own business in her local area (see figure 15, which shows the research tool used to stimulate this conversation):

Aim	Beautican
Why?	Because I ~~H~~ enjoy dressing People up /make up/hair
Where?	Own buisness ~~in where~~ Localy
When?	I am old enough
How?	go to collage
Who?	~~little~~ family + freinds.

Figure 15: Charlotte: "Aim: Beautician; Why: Because I enjoy dressing people up/make ip/hair; Where: Own business locally; When: I am old enough; How: go to college; Who: family and friends"

Project Worker 1 explained this change to traditional roles and aspirations was not restricted to Charlotte, but represented a more significant shift, in its very early stages, amongst the local Traveller community:

> …we're finding parents saying now "well, my daughter's speaking a lot more than I did as a kid – they're saying they want an education, they want to be educated". They don't want to be 15 year old and unable to read and write, they want to learn skills – they want to work in the future [Project Worker 1].

Traveller men are usually the sole breadwinners; self-employed and undertaking various trades depending upon the season, they have also been affected by the economic recession. Charlotte was aware of this and recognised it in her mother's wish for her to continue in school,

> Because she thinks like in a few years that everybody's going to have to get a job, even the girls […] Because everything's coming to a stop, like - do you know how me dad goes cutting down trees and landscaping? That's coming to a stop now [Charlotte].

Whilst Gypsy/Traveller culture can be viewed as patriarchal, data showed female Travellers in Charlotte's small community to be driving forward the education agenda. They want more for their children than they had as young women, including higher levels of literacy and employment routes for girls. Charlotte's involvement with Travellers North East had already had an influence upon her extended family and herself, and she did acknowledge the need to pursue an alternative route to that traditionally expected of a young female Traveller. Projects like Travellers North East

> **...**actually work with the community and empower that community of young people – they've got a voice and they say "we don't want to". […] Some of the more open families are starting to address this and starting to change it [Project Worker 1].

Charlotte's family are an example of this; a combination of the project's advocacy role and changes in the labour market lead her family to take action (Derrington and Kendall, 2004).

Project Worker 2 agreed there were some small but significant changes occurring, but she warned this should not be viewed as a larger societal shift within the Traveller culture as "[Charlotte's mother] is one of the few mothers that I met that wanted her daughter to stay on at school so… I can't think of any other families" (Project Worker 2). However, Derrington and Kendall (2004) suggest there are a growing number of mothers whose aspirations for their children are diverging from Traveller norms. Charlotte's mother was educated (via TES) as a child, which may have influenced her positive attitude towards education for her own daughter. The effort expended to undertake this change should not go unnoticed; her mother went against her father's wishes to ensure Charlotte remained at school:

> [Charlotte's mother] obviously stood her ground because she's kind of gone against what everybody else wants them to do – and what her husband says […] [She] has totally gone against the grain because she's let her daughter stay in school for a lot longer than they would normally [Project Worker 2].

This passion for change for her daughter's future partly came from her own experiences of employment, which began during the research period; Project Worker 1 was responsible for employing her mother and describes the process as causing "…a huge cultural

change". This had a knock-on effect within her immediate community when her sister (Charlotte's Auntie) then became employed by the local authority within an important role on the site where they lived, a position which had never been filled by a woman previously ("it's always been a male job", Project Worker 1). As a result, Charlotte was part of a family in which two of the female members were "in very influential positions in the community" (Project Worker 1). It is difficult to comment on the effect this had on Charlotte as she disengaged from the research soon after her mother was employed as a Traveller Advocate and just before her Auntie was employed so we were unable to discuss this; the data from both Project Workers, however, offers an insight based on their close relationships with Charlotte and her family.

Earlier data collection with Charlotte showed she had a mixed view of her future education. On occasion she would describe it as integral to her employment aspirations but other comments suggested she would be happy to follow her cultural traditions. This was not a straightforward decision for Charlotte, with some conflicting attitudes to her education, including the relevance of school targets (Jordan, 2001):

> **Does it feel weird going in every day but you might leave in the summer anyway?**
> Not really, because I'm doing me SATs, next week.
> **[…] If you know you're going to leave it must be strange knowing what to aim for.**
> They've given me targets, like for the High School, and I don't know whether to aim for them or not…[Charlotte].

Charlotte did not describe incidents of bullying or that she hid her ethnic heritage ('passing') at school (Kiddle, 2000); her school had a large number of Traveller pupils due to its vicinity to local Traveller sites, which alongside the involvement of Travellers North East, developed a greater understanding amongst teaching staff about the cultural norms of Traveller pupils. Charlotte is committed to attending school, but generally does not do her homework ("I don't like doing homework though, I think that's a waste of time because … I don't learn nothing from it"). However, she did sit her SAT exams and is considering whether she should aim to meet the targets that have been set for her in her transition to high school. If Charlotte was going to leave school, the transition from middle to high school would have been her opportunity to do so;

> **Will you stay on after middle school?**
> I hope not […] Yeah…me mam wants me to go to high school but me dad says I don't have to.
> **So end of middle school is this year?**
> This year, yeah.
> **Potentially then, you could not have to go to school anymore?**
> Hopefully [Charlotte].

Although here she appeared to be hopeful in the early stages of research that she would leave school during this transition to high school, she did continue on to high school, as her mother had hoped she would. Both Project Workers recognised the significance of this choice:

> Charlotte's obviously not the norm because she's made a real big statement there […] at the end of the day, I think she's actually broken the mould [Project Worker 1].

> She's doing really well to still be there, you know, how old is she now? Like 14? That's pretty impressive really [Project Worker 2].

A possible contributor to this may be what occurred during this decision-making and transition period - her mother and Auntie became employed ("…having a job, it's a massive thing for a traveller woman", Project Worker 2), thus her role models changed and widened her horizons . Both family members had to take further training to take up their role: "I've put her on child protection training, she's been on health and safety training. I've now got her on basic maths and English courses; all these things empower her" (Project Worker 1). Charlotte would have observed this process of skills acquisition and employment. Despite the fact Charlotte faced "a lot of pressure from her friends that are Travellers for being at school still" (Project Worker 2), she chose to return and continued her education until at least the point at which data collection occurred with Project Worker 2 (January 2008). Charlotte's strong sense of identity (as a Traveller), which supported her generally positive self-concept (Muldoon, 2003), is likely to have played a part in her ability to withstand this peer pressure.

As I had lost contact with Charlotte at the endpoint of my research, it is difficult to comment on whether Charlotte's aspirations had been affected by her mother and Auntie being employed, although her continuation at school would suggest she planned to pursue some sort of employment requiring qualification, beyond the realms expected of her as a female Traveller. The limitations of my research role as a gorgio outsider offer an explanation for her disengagement and difficulty in getting family/friends to contribute to Charlotte's story. However, the benefit of telling Charlotte's story is two-fold: firstly to raise awareness of Gypsy/Traveller youth and their aspirations, illustrating that young people outside 'mainstream' youth have valid experiences and face the same range of influencers as young people generally; secondly to show that all young people are affected by larger societal changes and patterns (such as the impact of economic recession upon the labour market) and how tailored services (like Travellers North East for Gypsy Traveller communities) can provide support, guidance, training etc which enables people to adapt and achieve their aspirations.

4.3.2 Val
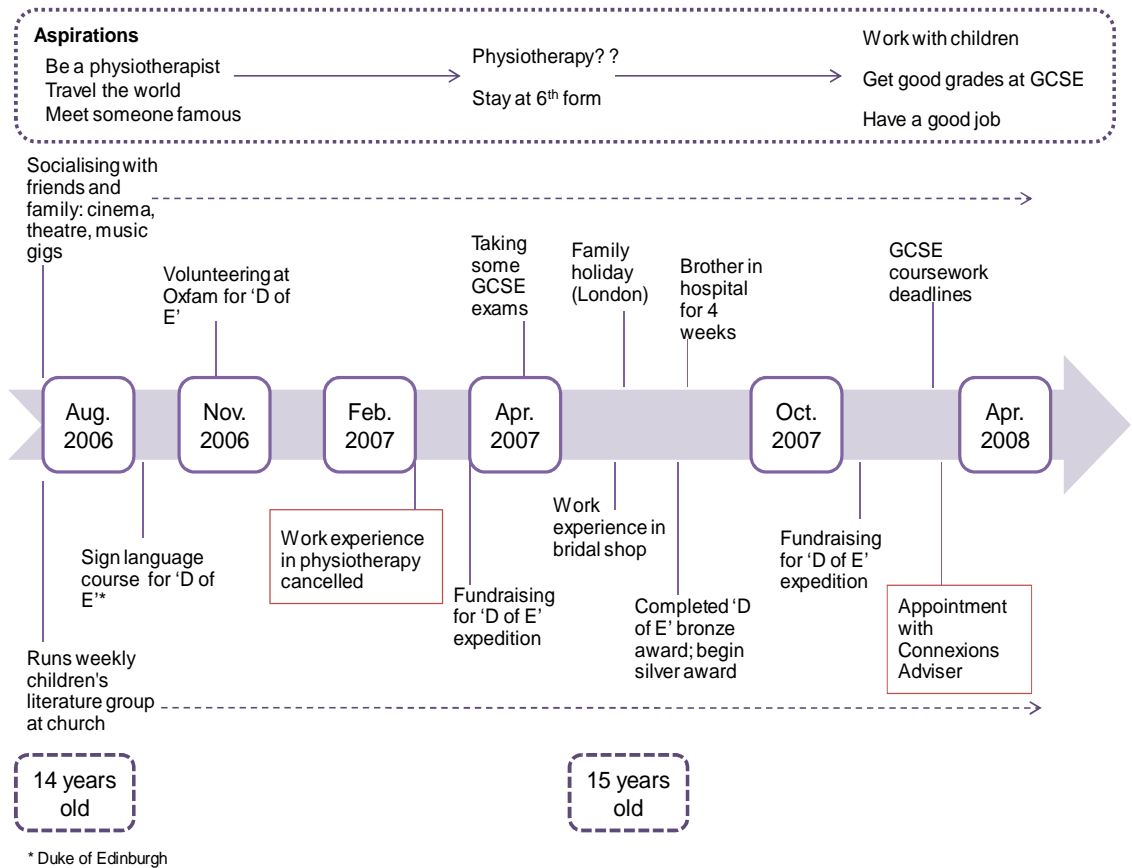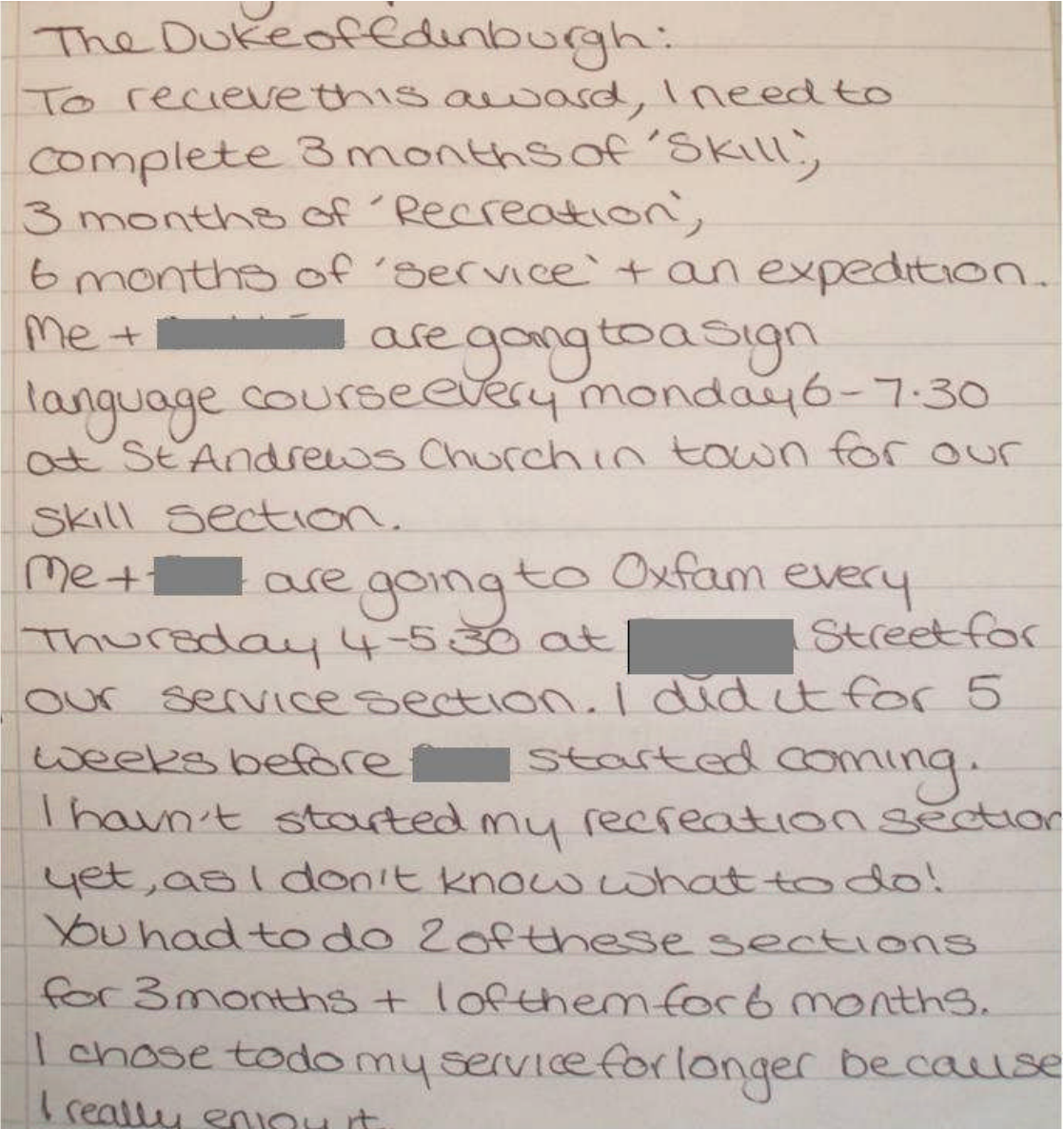
Figure 16: Val's biographical timeline

Val became engaged in my research during the summer tour organised by Aspire. Aged 14 at this point, she was easy to talk with in the presence of her friend and happy to participate. Val lives in an urban area with good public transport links and good local amenities; she does not attend school in this area, but travels to the other side of the city to attend a single sex Catholic secondary school. She aspired to become a physiotherapist, travel the world and meet someone famous. Her aspiration to become a physiotherapist was long-standing and based on her experiences with her older brother (by 11 years) who has cerebral palsy. At home, Val's mother is her brother's full time carer, whilst her father is in full time employment. She has a second older brother (by 9 years, in employment) who does not live at home but in the locality. The majority of her time outside of school was spent with her immediate and extended family, who also live within walking distance ("They're like my best friends because I spend so much time with them"). However, Val also regularly visited the cinema with close friends from school and occasionally went to music gigs with the same group; she was also a regular theatre-goer with her mother and brother.

Outside of school, Val dedicated some of her time to activities which benefited others; for example, she ran a children's reading group at her local church, which she attended every Sunday with her mother and brother: "I've been doing that for about 2 years". She also spent a great deal of time achieving her Duke of Edinburgh Bronze award (see figure 17 for details of the bronze award), focusing on activities including charity fundraising, volunteering at Oxfam, and learning sign language (which are examples of the types of positive activities indicated in DCSF, 2007a). Although this was not her main reason for doing so, Val recognised having these awards was important to her employment prospects (she planned on completing the silver then gold awards), that these additional skills and experience would "look good" on any job application she made.

The Duke of Edinburgh:
To recieve this award, I need to
complete 3 months of 'Skill';
3 months of 'Recreation',
6 months of 'service' + an expedition.
Me + ▮▮▮▮▮ are going to a sign
language course every monday 6-7.30
at St Andrews Church in town for our
Skill section.
Me + ▮▮▮ are going to Oxfam every
Thursday 4-5.30 at ▮▮▮▮ Street for
our service section. I did it for 5
weeks before ▮▮ started coming.
I havn't started my recreation section
yet, as I don't know what to do!
You had to do 2 of these sections
for 3 months + 1 of them for 6 months.
I chose to do my service for longer because
I really enjoy it.

Figure 17: Excerpt from Val's memory book: The Duke of Edinburgh bronze award

During the research period, Val successfully organised and ran fundraising events to contribute to the end-of-award expedition; in her memory book she proudly included a

thank you card given to her from several teachers thanking her for her hard work and praising the success of one of these events (Keys, Harris and Fernandes, 1995). Overall, Val was a quietly confident young woman, committed to helping others and happy to work hard to achieve this, she demonstrated valuable, transferable skills (such as organisation, teamwork, fundraising etc) which would support her employment prospects. However, Val's positive attributes and abilities, whilst acknowledged by others, remained unharnessed because a central point of contact (that was able to bring these together and help focus her transition from education to employment) was missing.

From the outset, Val was clear about her employment aspiration to become a physiotherapist: "because my brother has cerebral palsy and I thought [the job] was quite interesting".
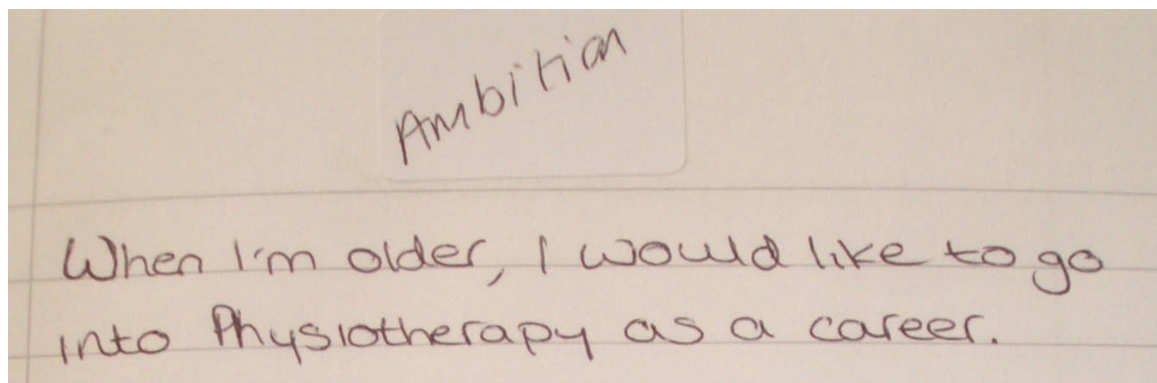
Figure 18: Excerpt from Val's memory book: Ambition - "When I'm older, I would like to go into Physiotherapy as a career"

Her mother supported Val's decision to pursue physiotherapy, believing this profession would suit her because "she is quite a caring person […] She doesn't see anybody with a disability as being different – she treats everybody the same" due to her experiences at home with her brother. Physiotherapy, although not traditionally categorised as care work, may be considered to fall within the care industry which is considered a traditional discourse around working class femininities, associating femininity with altruism and care of others (Archer *et al.*, 2005). Her mother's comment about Val's future career is representative of this discourse:

> I think she will actually end up in some sort of profession, [with] a caring side in some way, whether it be nursing or physio, or childcare or what. I think she will go down that route [Mother].

My analysis of Val's data would suggest that exposure to a range of health, social care and education professionals at the support centre and school designed to meet her brother's specific needs had sparked her interest in physiotherapy as a career; her initial interest in pursuing a 'care' role may have reflected a working class femininity, but the opportunity for contact with people and institutions holding different levels of

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power/authority (Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007) presented via her brother's care offered a form of linking social capital, which Val's working class background would not normally give. So, in this sense, Val's close relationship with her family, and in particular her mother as a full time carer to her brother, has given her the exposure to a range of health and social care professionals she may not usually have access to. As a result, she had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the role and responsibilities of physiotherapists; in figure 19, she anticipates what will occur during the work experience week she organised:
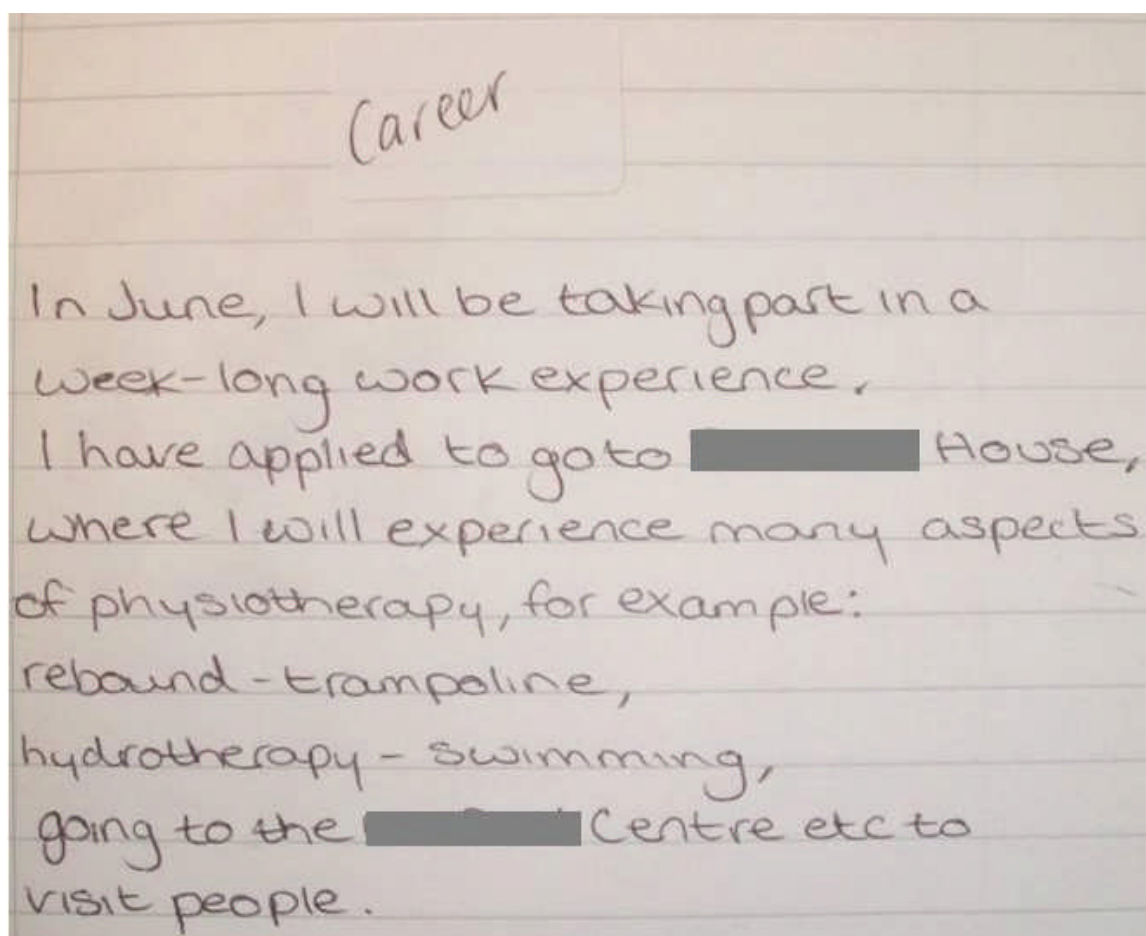
Figure 19: Excerpt from Val's memory book: Career - "In June, I will be taking part in a week-long work experience. I have applied to go to [name] House, where I will experience many aspects of physiotherapy, for example: rebound-trampoline, hydrotherapy – swimming, going to the [name] Centre etc to visit people"

She had initially spoken with her brother's physiotherapy team two years prior to her Year 10 work experience, explaining she wanted to spend the week with them:

> …a couple of years ago, before she even got into work experience, she started asking about it, where she could go. She asked [brother]'s team of physios could she go there and they said 'yes, no problem, you can come with us' [Mother].

Val made this contact and arranged this work experience independently of her school (which would usually organise work experience placements for most students),

demonstrating her will and ability to achieve her aspirations (an example of self-efficacy; Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004). However, when Val asked again nearer the time of her scheduled work experience, she was told that policy had changed in the interim and "patient confidentiality" meant she would be unable to work there. She then followed up a second option, with the help of her mother, which would have involved working with amputees, the elderly and disabled young people; unfortunately she faced disappointment yet again:

> I had it all sorted out and everything, for months. They had me date of birth the whole time and then a couple of weeks ago, he's (the Lead Professional) like "oh, you can't do it" [Val].

The reason given was her age; at 14, she was too young to undertake work experience at this particular organisation and was told to reapply at 16. This was particularly frustrating for Val because she had shared her age with her main contact whilst organising the work experience.

The combined effect of both disappointments regarding her physiotherapy work experience had a significant impact upon Val's aspirations for employment. Whilst the last minute disappointments were significant in themselves (i.e. not having an appropriate work experience placement), the fact that Val herself had been central to driving her aspirations forward by negotiating access to both settings (demonstrating her agency) appears to exacerbate the damage to her physiotherapy aspiration, which in retrospect and based on Val's response to disappointment, appeared to be fragile. Essentially, Val 'lost' her aspiration to become a physiotherapist, and with that her drive to pursue relevant work experience, particular subject choices at A-level, and the higher education she would have required (Anderson *et al.*, 2002). Val described herself as feeling "let down" by both organisations, following which she "went off the idea" of physiotherapy. Val's mother makes a similar point, "...it hasn't worked out and now she's thinking, 'ah well, I cannot be bothered'." Subsequent comments by Val show she did consider the alternative outcome had she been able to undertake physiotherapy work experience, illustrating the negative impact of repeated disappointments (Cieslik and Simpson, 2006):

> …if I'd done [physiotherapy work experience], that would probably have given us some more information on actually doing it and I think I probably might have still wanted to do it and everything, after having the experience of it [Val].

Despite her disappointment and once again independently of her school, Val used a contact of her mother's to organise work experience in a local retail outlet (an example of using bonding social capital within a working class family and of a traditional discourse of working class femininity focused on appearance); her response to this experience

illustrates her generally positive outlook, focusing on how she did benefit from this opportunity in terms of future employment preferences:

> I did quite enjoy it because you were getting to interact with different people all the time […] I think I'd rather be doing something like that than working in an office [Val].

Other factors which affected Val's ability to manage such disappointment (positively or otherwise) and develop alternative aspirations played an important role; these included the support systems available to her (her family, friends and school), her connection to the North East, her self-concept (including her learner identity), and the overarching 'deficit' account of aspirations, which I will now discuss.

Val's parents were very supportive of their daughter and had instilled in her a 'work hard and reap the rewards' attitude towards life. Neither her mother or father had attended higher education; both parents were qualified to O-level (equivalent to GCSEs). Val had a particularly close relationship with her mother, describing her as one of her best friends and her mother had a significant impact upon Val's ideas and decisions about education and employment. Whilst Val recognised her mother hoped she would "do really well and get a good job" (Val), her basic message to her daughter was to do what she "enjoyed doing" (Val), that happiness was more important than the status or wealth a career might bring; in summary, her mother would not mind what Val pursued in employment "as long as you're happy" (mother). Her mother felt higher education was not always a useful pursuit for everybody, explaining she knew of two friends whose children had attended university, taken on debt, graduated and were employed in positions they could have gained without a degree. She felt this endless pursuit for educational qualifications could be detrimental and that "…some people can have too much education and not enough common sense, life skills." (mother). Policy discourse would suggest Val's mother demonstrates 'low' aspirations for her child as she is not encouraging her to pursue post-16 or higher education; the impact of this is Val would also have 'low' aspirations and then the demand she and her mother are able to place on the system to ensure public services (e.g. education) meet their needs is diminished (DCFS, 2007). To a certain extent, Val shared her mother's opinion; although she had not ruled out HE as an option, she did not aspire to go to university (once her aspiration to become a physiotherapist had dissipated).

During interview Val and her mother discussed that "there is a job for everybody" (Val) and "Everybody needs everybody to do a certain job for the world to go round" (mother). They agreed happiness was more important than the salary they earned. In the same way

as Eleanor's (introduced in the following section) parents value their higher education qualification and experience, Val's mother placed equal value upon her work ethic and own non-HE route to employment:

> I think you can work your way up in a shop anyway, to shop management and stuff […] sometimes you learn more actually being out in the world and working … you can get as far because of who you know, and being in the right place at the right time [Mother].

Indeed, whilst this may be the case, often such an approach ('it's who you know, not what you know') means young working class women like Val remain in their local area, limited to employment opportunities offered through the local grapevine, curtailing social mobility, whereas middle class contexts of choice offer a broader spectrum of opportunities often in higher status positions (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001).

Aside from this attitude towards further education and employment opportunities, Val's aspirations were also influenced by her attachment to place, her relationship with 'home' in the North East. I would question, if her physiotherapy aspiration had not been thwarted, whether she would have pursued this aspiration once she realised this route would potentially take her away from the region and her family (Craddock *et al.* 2007). Physiotherapy at degree level is a very competitive market and only two universities in the region offer this course, therefore to increase her likelihood of success, she would have had to considered moving away from the region; data suggests this is not likely to have happened:

> **Do you want to stay in the North East?**
> Yeah, that's definitely one thing that's important to us. I think I'm quite like… a home person. I don't really like to be too far away from me family and that [Val].

Her mother concurs, "I can't really see her going any great distance away". Val described this as an active choice to stay in the region because of love for her family (Archer and Yamashita, 2003b); she also reasoned "…who's to say that if they were to move away or something, then they would have a happier job or anything if they did?". Val's mother described two categories of person, those that sacrifice everything for their career and those who put their family first; there appeared to be no middle ground and she stated her preference for a supportive, known quantity (home and family): "I think unless your career is your be-all and end-all in life… you wouldn't move because you'd rather be around family and friends and that - you've grown up with the same people." Val's own opinion mirrored this,

> I just know that I do want to stay, like near me family and that…
> **So, if you looked at the priorities in your life, what comes first?**
> Family [Val].

It is difficult to accept that Val's desire to stay in the region should be viewed as a *consequence* of her working class upbringing (as the deficit account would frame it), and that this was not an *active choice* on her behalf to prioritise her family, with employment aspirations adapting to fit around this preference. Whilst data analysis shows Val was weighing up her options, requesting education and employment information from external sources (in particular Connexions) in addition to advice from her parents, there were other factors which may have limited her horizons in terms of education aspirations, in particular a poor academic self-concept.

Comments made about Val by her mother and teacher focused on her personality and not on her academic ability or achievements. They emphasised Val's nice, caring nature and she fulfilled this role successfully, but had a poor academic self-concept

> I'm in top sets at school and everything, but at the same time I don't think of me self as clever as some other people, like some of me friends who are in my class […] …in science and everything, I'm really seriously thinking about doing the foundation paper so I can get at least a C [Val].

Whilst her teacher described Val as "a good student", she explained "she's not a high flier" but suggested she would be judged on "her innate interpersonal skills – and I hate to say it - general niceness" rather than her academic performance. However, her teacher was keen to emphasise this was not a slight against Val; indeed she ranked interpersonal skills as equally as important as academic achievement regarding aspirations:

> …aspirations should not just be academic; they should be whether you're a good person. So I think maybe within the North East, the aspirations of children academically are not being fulfilled or fuelled by [teaching] staff – but perhaps we are giving good aspirations as far as being a nice person […] but it's never given kudos, it's never given the praise [Teacher].

Here Val's teacher refers to the framing of 'valuable' aspirations as those based only on academic achievement and the related high status careers; the focus of education is largely upon gaining qualifications as a reflection of the worth of a person (in terms of labour market value) (Lee, 2005). Val keenly felt this pressure to hold high aspirations for education and employment; she became quite distressed at times when I asked about her aspirations, describing herself as not having any aspirations and saying "it sounds bad, doesn't it?". On further discussion, it became obvious that she did have aspirations she wanted to pursue, but this did not necessarily involve university, which is framed as the rational and desirable choice (Archer and Yamashita, 2003a).

As Val's aspirations did not match those expected of her (based on her academic potential) as endorsed by policy and media discourse, this left her feeling lacking or deficient in some way and searching for an opportunity to discuss her possible options

following GCSEs. Her natural response was to discuss this with her mother in the first instance and they discussed future employment involving children, again a traditional discourse of femininity, which incorporated Val's interpersonal skills, experience of caring for her brother and leading the reading group at church. Her focus at this stage was wide ranging, "…mainly like primary teaching and… nursery nurses and em…like… just like loads of different…social workers and things like that."; despite making these suggestions, she was keen to emphasise on more than one occasion during interview "…like I say, it's just one of those things I really don't like know about yet.". However, at this stage, she was certain she wanted to stay on at 6th form at her current school and did not consider any other option than studying A-level.

Val accessed careers advice from Connexions in school late in Year 11; her teacher felt the pupils had been "let down" due to the repeated absence of their Connexions Personal Adviser in school. Without "a permanent member of staff" or any system by which pupils were informed when the PA was available, those pupils without a clear direction or particular aspirations may have found it difficult to source the relevant information. When Val finally had her Connexions appointment, 3 months prior to her completing Year 11, she had taken on board advice from her mother and presented her preference for working with children to the Adviser.

> I was mentioning wanting to go into something with childcare and that, and em, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do within it, but em… [he] gave we information packs about what kind of things we could do within that and stuff […] [I'm] Still not quite sure, but it's like given me options and I know what kind of things are available [Val].

Importantly, the Connexions PA did not ask Val about any other interests, skills or academic achievements, taking her suggestion regarding working with children as the only one on which to offer additional information about potential jobs and required qualifications. As a typically gendered route for a young female from a working class background, 'working with children' gave Val a wide range of potential options but she focused on two – primary teaching and nursery nursing. When Val made her decisions about what to study at 6th form, she based them on the advice and guidance offered in this one Connexions session and the subject she had most academic success in:

> I'm thinking about Sociology – because that's like, that was recommended for the childcare and that … [and] R.S. [Religious Studies] because it's just something that I think's quite easy really and I've… I can just do it really [Val].

Her choice of A-levels at this stage forecloses any possibility of returning at a later date to her previous aspiration to become a physiotherapist (which typically requires at least 100 of the 300 required points to come from a science-based subject at A-level).

During our final session together, discussion with Val illustrated once again her poor academic self-concept and the pressure she felt to conform to 'being aspirational'; when asked to consider the aspirations for education and employment she had at the outset of the research and to compare them with her aspirations at that point, Val struggled to respond. Eventually, perhaps feeling pushed to give 'an answer' (despite reassurance from me otherwise), she suggested two non-specific aspirations, one for education and one for employment:
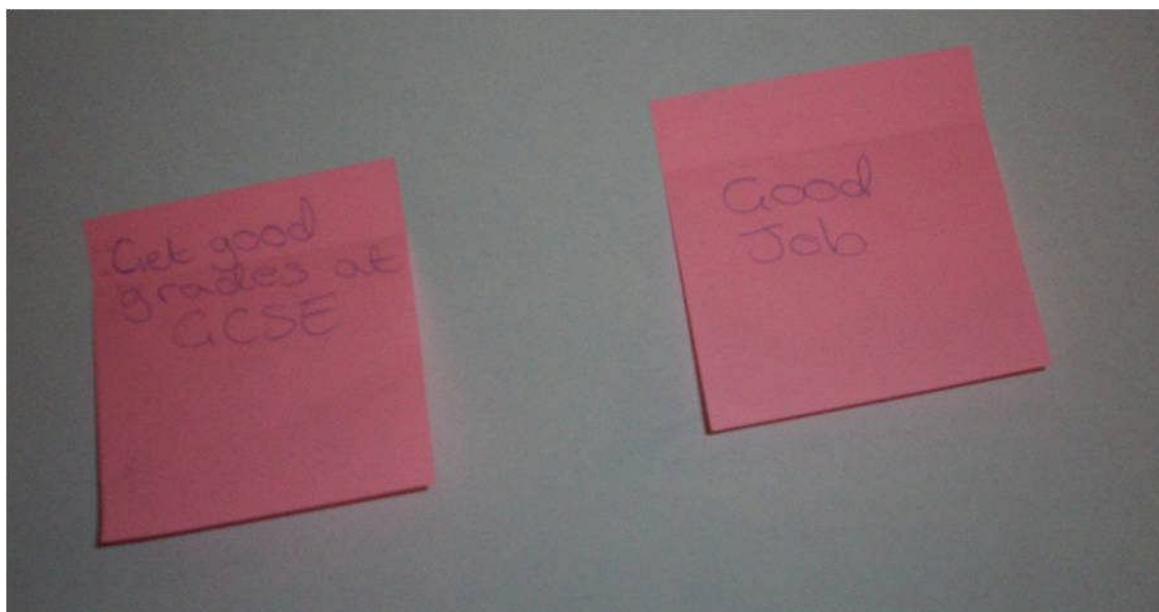
Figure 20: Val's aspirations at research end: "Get good grades at GCSE", "Good job"

Val felt unable to be any more specific about her aspirations than figure 20 illustrates. This is likely to be due partly to the repeated disappointment she faced regarding her physiotherapy work experience; had she pursued this long-held aspiration, it would have set in stone her educational and employment trajectory into adulthood, but without this focus, she did not seem to have a longer term view of her future education or employment. I had been concerned my presence as a researcher asking about young people's aspirations was putting pressure upon Val to 'have aspirations', but at the end of the research process I was appeased as she felt confident to state her more general aspirations without the need to elaborate in order to conform to external expectations:

> I try to like focus on one thing at a time […] I know I want to get good GCSEs and everything, and I want to have a good job […] I don't really like know what's in between, if you know what I mean […] It's something I haven't really thought about – like I say, I'm trying to like get through GCSEs and that first before I like think about [higher education and employment] that much [Val]

This demonstrates she did not know how to make the journey from her current position taking GCSE exams to having 'a good job' in the future, which was made more difficult as she lacked a clear vision of what employed position she might pursue. Val would only

comment that, in terms of her GCSEs, she was "not bothered about As and A*s and everything, but I just want like…I want like higher than a D.", revealing her less than confident academic self-concept yet again.

Val did not have any one person (unlike, for example, Carley with her Connexions PA, or Clare and her mother (see following section) who could reflect on the successful aspects of her education, skills, achievements etc and support her in combining these to develop education and employment aspirations which suited her (incorporating her prioritisation of family and attachment to the North East) and inspiring her to succeed. However, it is important to note that Val, whilst disappointed initially regarding her damaged aspiration to become a physiotherapist, appeared largely content with her chosen pursuit which focused on getting her GCSEs and studying at 6th form in order to get a 'good job'. The one area she was frustrated with was the external pressure she felt (from school, peers, policy and media discourse) to have 'high' aspirations, in particular the expectation to go to university. I would suggest the final aspirations shared by Val, including her unwillingness (or inability) to elaborate any further, reflect a response of self-preservation (in the face of a damaged aspiration) and an avoidance of discussion regarding the specifics of longer-term aspirations for education and employment of which she had not yet developed.

4.4 Eleanor and Clare: Strong support networks and positive self-concepts

The stories of Eleanor and Clare offer an opportunity to explore the development and function of support networks, positive self-concept and agency upon a young person's aspirations. In bringing Eleanor and Clare together in this analytic set, I illustrate how a young woman can draw on resources in her faith community, family and self to develop and pursue aspirations which may traditionally be unexpected (for example, in Clare's case due to her social class and family composition). Clare's story demonstrates the importance of disregarding face value judgements about young people based on general characteristics (such as social class) in favour an in-depth examination of a young person's life in context. Overall, both Eleanor and Clare demonstrated they had focused and largely consistent aspirations over the research period, based on their desire to pursue aspirations in which they demonstrated talent and enjoyment. Their families share a strong active faith base (Eleanor is Church of England and Clare is Catholic), which is partly responsible for their strong sense of self and belonging, and in Eleanor's case inspires her aspirations. Unlike Sadie and Carley, school is far less visible in Eleanor and Clare's data; Eleanor is the youngest of all my participants and, for her, school is yet to

become as pressured and target-driven as the experiences of Val, Sadie, Carley and Clare (who are studying for their GCSEs). Clare's life is absolutely invested in her passion for performing arts, largely outside of school hours, so for her school only appears when discussed in relation to this passion. Both young women have strong female role models in their mothers; their stories, like Carley's, demonstrate the value of a positive female role model who inspires, they aspire to and rely upon for support; Eleanor's mother offers this through her professional life and achievements as a teacher, whilst Clare's mother is an inspiration to her as a lone parent working full time, ensuring she has access to the performing arts activities she aspires to.

4.4.1 Eleanor
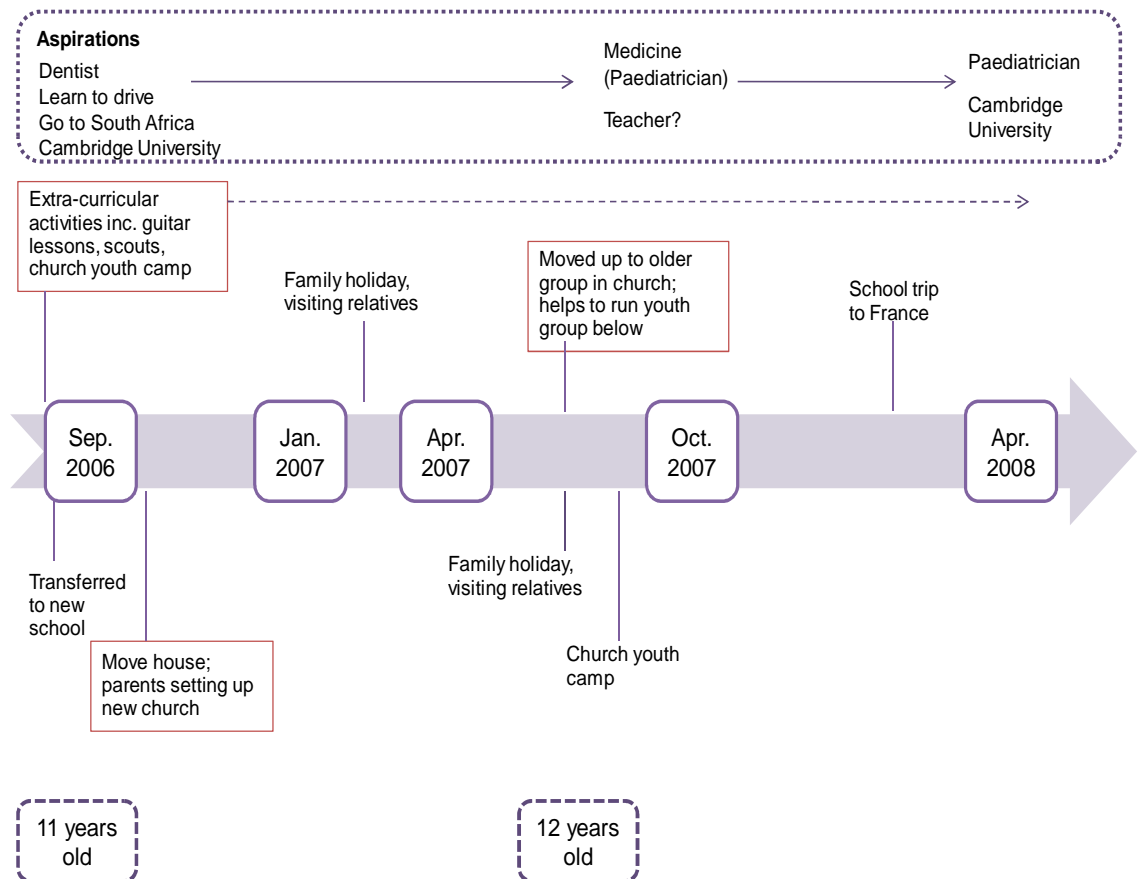

Figure 21: Eleanor's biographical timeline

On first meeting Eleanor, she was 11 years old and an extremely confident young woman. She was eager to contribute to my research and regularly asked questions about the research topic, other participants, my future career etc. She lived with her mother (teacher), father (nurse) and older brother (by 2 years) in an urban area with excellent

public transport links and good local amenities[21]. Eleanor's extended family live throughout the UK, with no other family members living in the North East; they would spend their holidays visiting relatives across the country. Eleanor would face two major transitions in her life: immediately before my research began, she had transferred from a local primary school to a middle school approximately 16 miles away from her then home in preparation for an upcoming house move. Despite leaving childhood friends behind and the house she grew up in, Eleanor dealt with both in a mature manner; in part this was due to her nature/personality but also as a reflection of the reason behind the move – her parents are part of a Christian organisation who supports its members to set up new churches and their relocation was a result of this. Eleanor's connections with her faith and faith community are a significant source of support, inspiration and motivation for her, and integral to her outlook and attitude. The faith community to which Eleanor's family belonged offered friendship and support to all the family. Her faith and her active observance of it contribute heavily to her developing aspirations, strengthening her firm self-belief and offering opportunities to interact with a wide range of people from backgrounds different to her own (an example of bridging social capital, Stevens *et al.*, 2007). Activities external to school are largely within her faith community, alongside her parents and older brother (e.g. scouts, youth group, youth camp). However, faith is not solely responsible for Eleanor's aspirations; her parents' professional identities within education (mother) and health (father) provide Eleanor with positive working role models who are able to afford her access to opportunities as a reflection of their middle class background i.e. the affluent areas in which they have lived, schools they have attended, resources available etc.

In combination, Eleanor's faith and family life frame her developing aspirations, which are categorised as 'high' in terms of government policy. Eleanor's aspirations for education and employment were particular and high status, progressing from dentistry ("…being a dentist might be a bit boring. I might be stuck in a room all day...") to paediatrics. The progression of her developing aspirations is reflected in her experiences, as illustrated in figure 21; for example, her move into the older youth group at church meant she was able to become a leader in the groups for younger children and it was this contact that led to her to specify paediatrics as the branch of medicine she was considering. Another constant throughout the research period was her aspiration to go to Cambridge University:

> I've always kind of wanted to go to Cambridge or Oxford as choice of universities.
> **And where did the idea that you wanted to go to Cambridge and Oxford come from?**

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[21] For some of the research period, a female lodger (known to the family through their church) stayed in the family home.

> Um… the fact that I'd always heard that they were really good universities and things. And I want to do well [Eleanor].

Eleanor had been on a trip to Cambridge with her family when they visited the grounds of Cambridge University on her request, at which point her parents told her more about the institution. She has given careful thought to her journey to higher education, from her own ability to the finances involved to her employment thereafter (demonstrating reflexivity, Goldthorpe, 1996, in Andres *et al.*, 1999):

> I do want to use the skills I've got. I'm in top set for everything, I'm quite bright, I got 5's in my SATs[22]. I don't want to do something which doesn't require any skill at all. […] Well, [my brother] did his year 9 SATs[23] a year early, and I'm going to do them a year early. He got level 8 and I would really, really – I don't think I'm going to get level 8, I'm only working at level 7 at the moment and they're in May - but I would really like to get level 8! [Eleanor].

As part of her plan to go on to higher education, Eleanor has been made aware of the finances that will be available to her to pursue this aspiration (Schoon, 2006, in Gutman and Akerman, 2008). She feels she is in a position to avoid one of the most significant barriers to higher education for some young people due to the generosity (and available resources) of her grandparents:

> …my grandparents decided to give us our inheritance that we'd get when they died, before they died, so then it would get interest in mine and [brother]'s bank and it would mean they wouldn't have to pay tax on it. I've got that money and that's always getting interest, so I've got quite a bit of money of my own […] and it's getting bigger all the time […] I don't think I've got enough money to go to university yet but with 7 more years of interest and Christmas money [laughs]
> **Is that something you do yourself, save money for your future?**
> Yes…my Christmas money, I got £100 and I spent some of it on books and stuff but then most of it, about £80, went in the bank [Eleanor].

Eleanor shows she is not relying solely upon the support of her family to get her through university, but is actively pursuing her aspirations by contributing to her savings when she is able. The financial resources available to Eleanor from her family are unique to her within the participant sample as no other participant had access to similar levels of funding for the purpose of realising their aspirations.

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[22] Year 6, Key Stage 2 standard assessment tests in English, maths and science. By the age of 11, most children are expected to achieve level 4.
http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ExamsTestsAndTheCurriculum/DG_10013041

[23] Year 9, Key Stage 3 standard assessment tests in English, maths, science, history, geography, modern foreign languages, design and technology, art and design, music, P.E., citizenship, R.E. By the age of 14, most children are expected to achieve level 5.
http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ExamsTestsAndTheCurriculum/DG_10013041

In this active pursuit of her aspirations, Eleanor has considered her father's guidance that she should not focus only on her academic credentials, so she chose to invest some of her pocket money in guitar lessons:

> With jobs where…they'll be wanting someone that's like, my dad says, someone that's all-rounded, overall – which is why I've took up guitar now […] If you get to grade 8 or something, which is obviously quite advanced, you get kind of an extra A-level or something like that […] So now I'm paying for every Thursday at 7 o'clock so it's not in school time [Eleanor].

She also makes the point that these lessons are not taking her away from her school classes, which is important to her. Eleanor's level of awareness and commitment to her aspirations is notable when taking account of her young age. Whilst literature does suggest as she grows older her self-belief may diminish (see Gutman and Akerman, 2008) and status of occupations aspired to lessen (see Furlong and Biggart, 1999), Eleanor has a range of 'protective' factors in place (e.g. social class, faith, her already strong self-belief) which make this less likely.

Eleanor was clear about her respect and admiration for her parents, viewing them as role models and aspiring to share their work ethic:

> I look up to my mum and dad because I think they've achieved a lot in life and stuff, and got a good life... [Eleanor].

As an extension of this, Eleanor finds encouragement for herself in her parents' achievements:

> If I felt like I needed encouragement, I could kind of think 'well, actually, my dad's got a really good job, he's quite like 'high up' as you might call that, in the nursing profession'… 'My mum's a teacher, she really enjoys it… and she's a [subject] Coordinator'. So I can tend to think well actually, they've managed to work hard, they've done stuff with their life that's good. I can think, well, I can do that if they can do that [Eleanor].

Her mother concurs and believes Eleanor has aspirations for education and employment "…because of us", her mother and father (DfES, 2007; Andres *et al.*, 1999); indeed Eleanor herself recognises the role her mother in particular played in her aspirational attitude and reflected upon this:

> I think mum knows that she tried hard and she got a lot out of life, so she wants us to try hard and stuff as well [Eleanor].

Eleanor's mother and her maternal family line also offer Eleanor her 'back-up plan' for the future; Eleanor's mother is a teacher and

> …her mum was a teacher, that made her want to be a teacher as well […] I think Grandma's mum was a teacher as well, we've got a long generation of teachers in the family [Eleanor].

Eleanor's knowledge of the profession and awareness of what it has provided for her family in terms of a working role model in her mother and the monetary benefits means this remains a real possibility for Eleanor throughout the research period ("I might still want to be a teacher."); this is a reflexive process as she will continue to assess her own performance, resources and opportunities throughout her adolescent years (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). Although she has not shown enthusiasm for this prospect, she continued to bring it up as a possibility throughout the research period, similar to Sadie who also had a 'back-up plan'.

Eleanor's father, whilst recognising the value of aspirations in themselves, felt it was important not to encourage her to focus solely on one particular occupation or pathway at this age,

> …because it may be that actually she wants to do something else that she doesn't know about yet. It's more useful for her at this stage to be seeing what other jobs and careers there are, rather than just focusing entirely on one. […] I think it's much too early to be railroading her down that track [Father].

The family's involvement with their faith community enables her father to provide this opportunity and introduces Eleanor to people with a wide range of occupations and experiences as an example of bridging social capital (Stevens *et al.*, 2007). Her mother explained their congregation comprises of various ethnic backgrounds, including a large proportion of immigrants and asylum seekers, which exposes Eleanor to life outside of her immediate environment. She also described their larger network of family and friends across the UK as being significant in influencing Eleanor's aspirations for education and employment; this bridging social capital offers Eleanor greater opportunities to experience a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, as well as potential contacts she may utilise in order to achieve her aspirations (Di Maggio, 2001) .

As the research period moved on, Eleanor's aspirations became more particular; where she had previously discussed studying medicine at Cambridge University, she moved on to explain she was interested specifically in becoming a paediatrician. This aspiration followed a significant age-related change at her church youth group, as well as contributing to the development of youth work at the new church:

> Because I really, really like working with children – since we've moved here I've met more because I've helped out with more little people […]…since I moved into year 7 at school, at church I moved into the youth group for the age up... And when you're in that, you're allowed to help out with the younger people because you're deemed an appropriate age. So then I started helping out with that. And, the current church that we're planning here, I sort of do youth work there as well [Eleanor].

Regarding her aspiration to become a paediatrician, Eleanor wants to combine her enjoyment of and ability in science with her newfound enjoyment for working with young children, identifying paediatrics as an avenue to achieve this; working with children also represents a traditional discourse of femininity (Archer *et al.*, 2005). Her father's role as a health professional has exposed Eleanor to the range of occupations available, from which she has then balanced her educational ability and her hopes for the future with a strong self-confidence in her ability to achieve:

> I'm going to try and get an A and things like that, and I think *if* I try hard I should be able to get an A […] I think I'm quite a determined person – and I think that if I expect to do something and really want to do it, I think that makes it more likely that I will [Eleanor].

She recognises the value of believing in herself, that her expectation that she will achieve can help in realising that achievement (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004). This self-belief is drawn partly from her strong faith, which may define what Eleanor chooses to pursue in her life as she interprets its message literally:

> I want to kind of pick like a job or something which I'll enjoy, [religion] will help me… like if God says that I should go to Africa, then I can go to Africa [Eleanor].

Eleanor believes in the concept of her 'calling' and puts trust in her God to help her make the best decisions (McLaughlin, Trew and Muldoon, 2006). However, on plotting her aspirations for her future in a timeline during our last session together (figure 22), she anticipated a 'normal' biography (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002), progressing from higher education into a professional role, followed closely by marriage and children. There was no discussion regarding the potential tensions arising between her aspiration to become a mother and that to become a professional (see Fiebig, 2003).
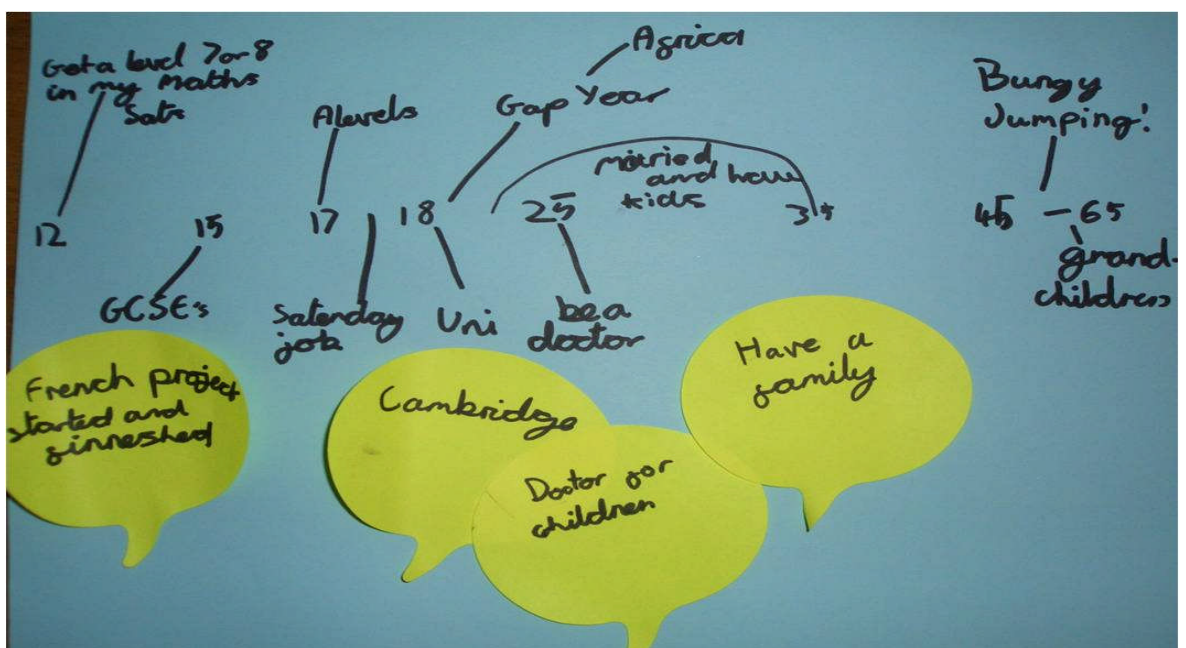
Figure 22: Eleanor's aspirations for education and employment.

4.4.2 Clare
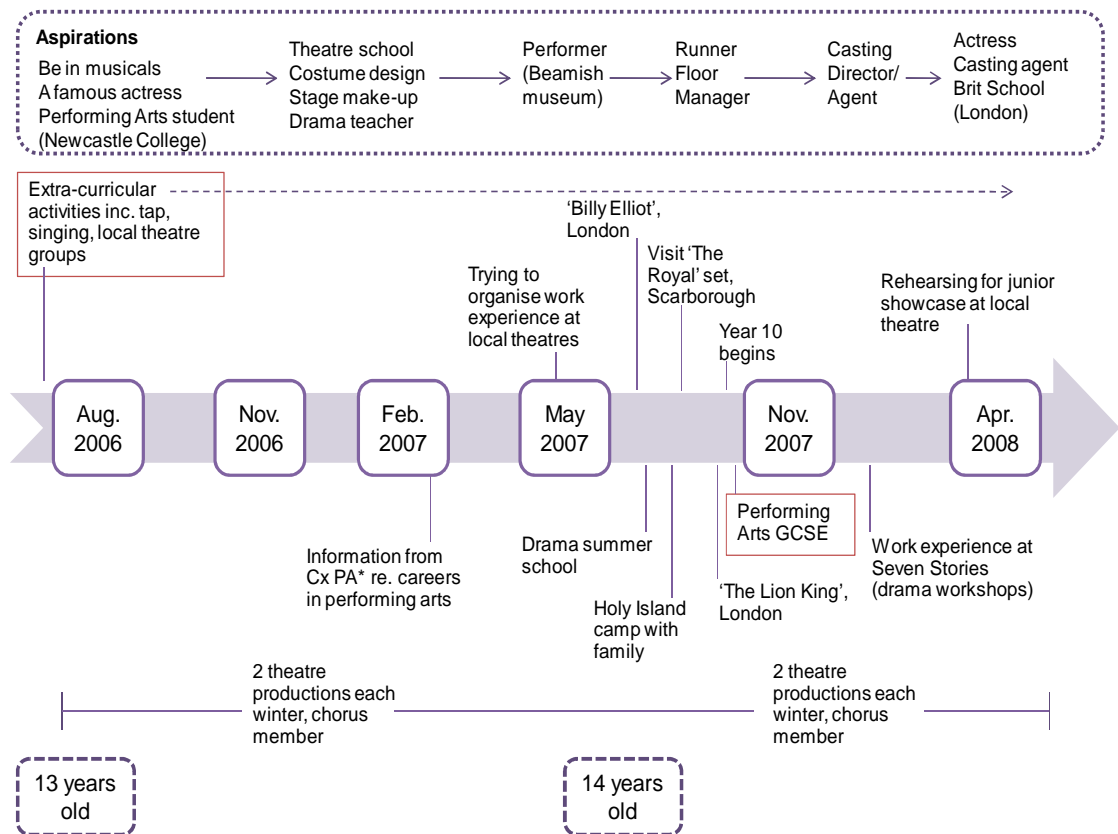
Figure 23: Clare's biographical timeline

Clare was 13 years old when the research commenced (she became involved with my research during the summer tour organised by Aspire); she was a confident, open and friendly young woman with a passion for performing arts which ran through almost every aspiration she shared during the research period. Clare lives in an urban area with excellent public transport links and good local amenities. She attends a single sex Catholic secondary school approximately 4 miles away from her home; her mother and grandmother attended the same school. Like Eleanor, she too was very interested in the research I was undertaking, asking about other participants' aspirations and backgrounds, and keen to give feedback on her experiences as a research participant. She shared numerous aspirations over the research period, all of which focused on her ambition to be involved in performing arts in some way; her ultimate aspiration was to become a West End performer and the other aspirations she shared reflected 'back-up' plans on her journey to or instead of this. As a member of two local theatre groups, she spent a great deal of time at rehearsals outside of school; her mother generally accompanied her to all such activities due to Clare's age and the need to travel outside of the local area. As Clare is an only child, her mother was able to give the majority of her time outside of her full time job to Clare's performing arts activities; she did this not only to support her daughter in her

aspirations, but also as an activity she enjoyed participating in herself (for example, her mother usually took on a backstage role in each theatre production Clare was performing in).

From the outset, Clare was very clear about where she hoped her future would lie – performing arts. Her main aspiration was to be an actor on the stage, aiming to live and perform in London. Figure 24 shows Clare has a number of plans for her future at this early stage in the research, including her main aim as a performer, in addition to ideas about what she will study at A-level and Higher Education. Whilst evidence would suggest that Clare's aspirations would be likely to diminish over time as a reflection of age, social class and her assessment of the likelihood of achieving them (for example, Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Furlong and Cartmel, 1994), her aspirations were refined to focus more specifically upon performing arts. In part this was due to disappointment during GCSE subject option choices, where she was unable to take GCSE History because the numbers of students opting to study within her ability group[24] was too few, so the option was retracted. Clare was deeply disappointed as she had

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[24] Her school operates a three tier ability grouping, with students assigned to top, middle or bottom tiers depending upon their academic ability. The tier system has an impact upon the number of options they are allowed to choose from for their GCSE subjects; Clare is in the middle tier so is given two GCSE options.
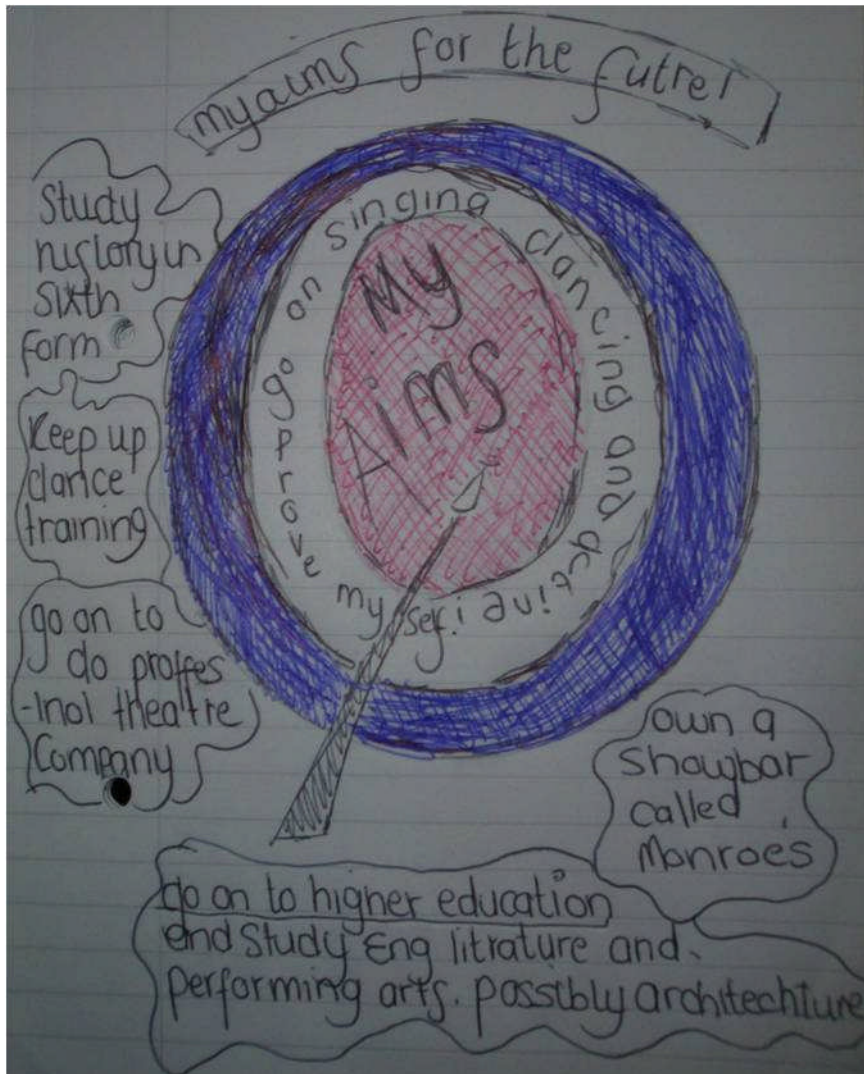
Figure 24: Excerpt from Clare's memory book: 'aims for the future'

hoped to continue to study history beyond GCSE to A-level; from Clare's perspective, she was being punished for her lower academic ability and felt it was very unfair that those in the upper tier were given three choices at GCSE. This shares a similarity with Sadie's experience and her disappointment at not being able to study Hair and Beauty (although she was excluded to allow for students with lower ability to take her place) (see Cieslik and Simpson, 2006 and Anderson *et al.*, 2002 regarding disappointment). This disappointment did not have as much impact upon Clare's trajectory as it did Sadie's (whose interests lay in hair and beauty) as Clare was able to study Performing Arts at GCSE, which she was her main priority. This helped overcome her disappointment regarding GCSE History and she focused attention even more so on achieving her aspiration to become an actor.

During the research period, the activities Clare partakes in are reflected in her developing aspirations (see figure 23); these include, actor/performer, makeup artist, runner, stage

manager, drama teacher, casting agent. These extra-curricular activities are supported by her mother and she is key to enabling many of these significant pursuits to take place for Clare. She encouraged Clare to reflect on her own experiences and the reality of the job market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994), bringing an element of realism to Clare's aspirations:

> I think I'd like her to stay with performing arts and take it as far as she can, but not necessarily in acting, but in…in background stuff, you know like Stage Manager […] …learn about the profession. Whereas there may be a job, a permanent job, and then if the acting thing comes up, you can still do that – but not solely with acting or singing, where very few get the parts [Mother].

She is happy to support her daughter to achieve her aspirations in performing arts because "the interest is there, it's held her and it's a fascinating, fascinating career". She believes Clare is in an advantageous position to achieve her aspirations because of the positive experiences she already has in performing arts (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004), combining this insider knowledge with her commitment to her passion:

> I mean a lot of people, you know Clare, want to do singing and that, and get on the X Factor … but you've been at the Theatre Royal three times. She's seen how the big sets come in and all sorts of things like that. It's fascinating stuff and it's very hard work, and it shows that sometimes it's not glamorous [Mother].

Indeed, Clare has made sacrifices in order to pursue these aspirations, largely her social life. She rarely sees her friends from school outside of school hours as most of her time is spent at dancing lessons and theatre group rehearsals, accompanied by her mother. Clare did not complain about not seeing her school friends or the amount of time she committed to rehearsals largely because she thoroughly enjoyed the whole theatre production process. Clare's school friends knew about her performing arts activities and would often be invited to see her perform in the latest musical, but would never attend: "Every time I'm like 'ah, do you want to come and see a show – they're like 'no'." Her response to this was to keep her theatre activities separate from her friendships in school:

> I don't really tell them about it much. I just keep my outside of school like…like separate. Most people see their friends all the time outside of school – and I see my friends outside of school, but I've got like another group of friends
> **Who aren't school friends?**
> Yeah. But I keep them separate [Clare].

Clare had a separate friendship group within her theatre groups who shared her interests (Kiuru *et al.,* 2007); she would see them mainly during rehearsals and production. Clare was able to conduct these aspects of her life separately in order to protect and sustain her aspirations in musical theatre from friends at school, choosing friends who support and affirm her developing aspirations (Robb *et al.*, 2007).

Clare had no contact with her father (he left her mother when she was 2 years old) and saw her extended family (maternal) for special occasions only (birthdays and Christmas).

The relationships she has with her mother and grandmother are very close and she spends a great deal of her spare time with them both, whether rehearsing, at church or shopping. The only place Clare is happy to stay the night is her grandmother's house and she does this at least one weekend a month. Clare said her mother and grandmother gave her the initial opportunities to try out performing arts and dancing, but she believes 'performance' is 'in her blood', passed down from her great-grandfather.

> …it's always been me Gran's side of the family, because her dad was a tap dancer. When I was little, she told me about him […] …he was in a dance troupe when he was younger, they used to go round the theatres. Me Gran found a photo when we were going through the other day – they've got checky shirts on and dungarees [Clare].

Her uncle (maternal) also enjoyed amateur dramatics when Clare was a young girl; she remembers his involvement in a local production of 'Annie', which she recalls as the first time she fell in love with musical theatre: "…when I was four I went to see Annie when [Uncle] was in it and I just sat and said 'that's what I want to do'. I was overwhelmed." From this young age Clare's mother recognised her love of performance and explained she would always "give her a chance" to try out the particular interest she had shown:

> …you wanted to do something, to try it, and I let you try it and it was obvious that she would stick with it. I thought maybe you would get fed up with tap after a while, but you didn't – you loved it didn't you? [Mother].

Equally Clare's mother and grandmother were both very clear that had they thought Clare would not succeed in any given interest, they would let her know: "I think we would tell her if we thought she could do better." [Mother].

She gained confidence from and was inspired by her relationships with her mother and grandmother[25]. They gave their full support to her aspirations, such as attending every performance she had given ("My Gran comes around three times to one show"), and both were vocal about their pride in what she achieves ("[my mam] always supports when I'm doing my acting and everything."):

> I'm very interested in what she's doing on stage and stuff like that. I'm very interested in that. And I admire her very much, from when she first went, and had to sing – she went in herself […] for the audition, and I admired her very much for that [Grandmother].

Clare describes the practical support from her mother as particularly important to her continuing to pursue her performance aspirations.

> Not without her support because if she didn't bother then I'd have nobody to take me because we don't have a car – on the bus and everything [Clare].

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[25] See Kao and Tienda (1998) on the positive impact of daughters' experiences of living with their single mother upon their aspirations.

Clare's mother's own childhood experiences influenced her approach to parenting and the importance of Clare's education; she felt young girls of her generation were encouraged to follow stereotypical female roles or "just left school at 16… There was no careers for us. […] We had nothing like that so I'd like her to be able to follow it through as far as she can." [Mother]. This was also true of Clare's extra-curricular activities, where her mother would accompany her to each dance class and theatre rehearsal. As a result, she became interested and then involved in some of the activities herself.

> I enjoy it, because I learnt …even about the chaperoning, it's got me backstage. And I've been fascinated seeing the things that go on. It was hard work… [Mother].

This now shared interest gave her mother an insight into how hard Clare works during rehearsals and productions; significantly it also built her knowledge around the industry itself, including the possible career routes to follow other than acting and how to pursue these. Whilst Clare, by virtue of her working class background, would typically not benefit from the same degree of social capital as Eleanor (Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007), her mother's active involvement in her performing arts activities appeared to override this. Her first point of contact was her mother for any of the additional information she required ("…me mam knows more like what I'm interested in and she knows 'ah, you'll need that to be like that'"). Her mother's full support and engagement within the local performing arts scene means Clare can source information via the 'local grapevine' (her mother) whom she trusts (Ball and Vincent, 1998), but does not necessarily suffer the negative consequences of this approach because her mother purposely seeks out the information from the appropriate sources that Clare may require:

> **Do you know the route you have to take to become a Drama teacher?**
> Yeah, me mam told me […] Study Performing Arts and then do it at university or college. Take a teaching degree [Clare].

Where she felt unable to give Clare the appropriate advice or information, she advised her to contact Connexions, which she did:

> They sent me [careers information] and I was reading it, and I thought 'I want to be a Floor Manager' …but do you know on film sets and that? Or if they're making TV programmes? It's basically these people who run around after everybody except they're in charge […] They organise loads of stuff and make sure everyone is doing the right thing, making sure they're standing back and everything […] when I went to Scarborough I saw them shooting 'The Royal' and there was the Floor Managers there [Clare].

This extract illustrates how Clare's mother then follows up her daughter's developing aspirations with relevant experiences, in this case a trip to see the filming of a television programme they watch together.

Another shared aspect of their family life is their Catholic faith. Their observance of Catholicism has been a constant in Clare's life and she continues to attend church on a Sunday with her mother and grandmother. This is a second example of Clare's resistance to peer pressure (the first regarding friends' attitudes towards her performing arts activities); despite their attendance at a Catholic school, Clare does not talk about religion or her observance of faith with friends at school,

> …because they'd be like 'shut up', you know what I mean… I wouldn't talk to them about it anyway […] But all me friends tease us because I go to Church on Sunday [Clare].

This teasing has not prevented Clare from continuing to practice her faith; similar to her response to her friends' reaction to her performing arts, Clare chooses to withhold this aspect of her life from her friendship group at school. Every summer since she was a small child she has attended a children's camp organised by the St Vincent de Paul Society (an international Christian voluntary organisation aimed at tackling poverty), where her grandmother and mother also volunteer to support the camp itself. The values she has learned through her faith and faith-based activities are viewed by Clare as integral to her personality, shaping her values and helping her make decisions in life (Henderson *et al.*, 2007; Muldoon, 2003); this notion is supported by her mother and grandmother, who help Clare accept disappointments in her life (such as not getting an acting part she had auditioned for) and overcome them through their faith by framing them positively (Muldoon, 2003):

> Sometimes we'll say, if you don't get a part, there's a reason for it. We'll always believe that – something else will happen […] There's a reason why - something else may come along that's better […] I think it's that attitude where if it doesn't happen, it's for a reason type of thing. We put we trust in God that way, don't we? [Mother]

It is likely this strength of belief and family observance of their faith means the attitudes of friends at school does not affect Clare as it might other young people who do not experience this.

Generally Clare has a positive outlook, self-confidence and a range of mechanisms she uses to maintain her aspirations in spite of friends' reactions, rejection following auditions etc. She demonstrated her ability to adapt a situation to suit her own needs and aspirations during her work experience week organised through her school. She had wanted to undertake this at the Theatre Royal (a theatre in Newcastle) where she had performed on numerous occasions. She recognised it would be competitive so at the beginning of year 10 chose to write directly to the person responsible for Learning and Education at the theatre, whose contact details she had sourced of her own volition:

> I wrote to her… about how much I love the Theatre Royal and how much I wanted to work there. She sent me a letter back to say it's nice you want to do that but you have to book online. So, we keep going on the website [but] I've got to wait until it says my dates for February… [Clare]

Clare did as was recommended but was not able to secure work experience for the dates set by her school; as a result, the school organised for Clare to do her work experience at Seven Stories (gallery and archive celebrating children's books), which initially was not ideal for Clare:

> I wasn't like wanting to go there… [but] they said 'we can tailor the job to make it relevant', and I said well, 'I like doing drama and that', so they put me in with the kids doing drama workshops on stories and that - we had to dress up! [Clare].

Like Val, she embraced and valued the work experience made available to her; unlike Val, this disappointment for Clare did not affect her longer term aspirations, in part because she was fully engaged in performing arts outside of this work experience opportunity (whereas this was not possible within Val's chosen field of physiotherapy) and had the full and active support of her mother in favour of her aspiration to perform.

As Clare's data has illustrated, she is committed to achieving her aspirations; whether she is protecting them from her friends' negative remarks or ensuring any practical experiences are relevant to realising them, she actively pursues her performing arts aspirations and recognises she must work hard to achieve them (Goldthorpe, 1996, in Andres *et al.*. 1999). When asked if there was any difference between her expectations and her aspirations for her future, she responded,

> Not really. I hope like – I expect to do all of this. If I push myself hard enough, then I will [….] teachers have all said 'aim for the highest you can'… but it's sort of like me saying it as well – I know that I will be able to do it if I put all the work in…you have to be hard working

Clare had thought through how she intended to achieve her aspirations and included these plans in her memory book during the early stages of the research period (figure 25). Clare explained the cut-out of her hand in figure 25 represented her belief that her future was in her own hands (Cassidy, O'Connor and Dorrer, 2006); this is demonstrated in her knowledge about potential careers within performing arts and how to attain them. For example, Clare wanted to go to Newcastle College because she had learned of their links with the stage show 'Billy Elliot' (which she had been to see in London that year):"…the man who was in it, and some of the miners, were from Newcastle College – and one of them had written the course for Newcastle College." [Clare]. This quote also demonstrates Clare's attachment to the North East; she recognises her strong attachment to her home city as a reflection of her family relationships could potentially hinder her plans for future education and employment:

Do you think one of the barriers might be your connections to Newcastle?
(Pause)… yeah
Would it ever hold you back?
Yeah… because I'm like that – I cannot even sleep over at a friend's [Clare].

Figure 25: Excerpt from Clare's memory book: "How do I achieve my goals?"

Whilst literature suggests this strong attachment to place may hinder young people realising their aspirations (Henderson *et al.,* 2007; Archer and Yamashita, 2003b; Reay, 1998), Clare found a way in which to marry the two to complement her performance aspirations as well as her connection to her family in considering studying at Newcastle College; she frames this not as a hindrance but as an advantage given the links the college has with the hit West End show 'Billy Elliot'.

Reflecting on her strong connections with her family demonstrates Clare's awareness of potential barriers to achieving her aspirations, an awareness which enables her to be flexible and realistic about future education and employment goals, and in turn may make realising these very aspirations more likely. In addition, her mother has made clear to Clare that she wants her daughter to take any "…opportunity to move, to follow what she wants to do" and she'd be "…happy for her to do it". Having realistic aspirations and monitoring their ongoing development may offer a degree of protection to Clare (and her aspirations) from disappointment:

Clare: …you cannot really picture yourself as that age [30] ...because you never
                 know what's going to happen
Mother: Well, you can plan but it doesn't…
Clare: But it doesn't always happen.

This acceptance allows Clare to adjust her expectations and redress her aspirations accordingly to incorporate any disappointments without losing the integrity of her aspirations. This realism did not, however, prevent Clare from developing a range of aspirations for education and employment within performing arts; during the last session of data collection, Clare plotted these along a timeline up to the age of 30 (see figure 26). Like Eleanor, Clare imagines her future with a partner and children, and did discuss the implications this may have upon her future career in terms of the childcare she would require; she felt that this responsibility could be undertaken by her mother.

Figure 26: Clare's final timeline of aspirations for education and employment

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

As researchers before me have evidenced (Archer et al., 2005; Bynner and Brynin, 2003; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000), understanding young people's developing aspirations for education and employment is not clear-cut and requires consideration of a myriad of factors which interact in complex ways with often unpredictable outcomes. Presentation of my empirical data in the previous chapter has illustrated the complicated and multi-faceted range of influencers potentially shaping young women's aspirations in the North East of England. In this chapter, I will synthesize the key points in response to the research aims outlined in chapter one.

5.2 Traditional 'female' aspirations and the influence of social capital

The stories of all six participants have offered an insight into what it means to be a young woman growing up in contemporary Britain and, in spite of evidence which suggests women's aspirations for education and employment are 'higher' (Francis *et al.*, 2003; Andres *et al.*, 1999), they continue to aspire to employment which reflects traditional discourses of femininity (i.e. a focus on altruism, care of others, appearance), particularly for those from working class backgrounds (see table 6) (Archer *et al.*, 2005).

Table 6: Participant aspirations reflecting traditional discourses of femininity

Participant	Aspiration(s)
Sadie	Hair and beauty; service industry (flight attendant)
Carley	Childcare (nursery nurse)
Charlotte	Hair and beauty (beautician)
Val	Physiotherapy; childcare (teacher, nursery nurse)
Eleanor	Dentistry; medicine (paediatrics)
Clare	Performing arts (acting, costume, hair and make-up, teaching)

Even where participants' aspirations appear to be for higher status professional careers, they specify more 'feminine' interests within the profession i.e. Eleanor would like to become a paediatrician; Clare considers stage costume, make-up artist, and drama teaching. For some participants, they were actively encouraged to pursue such aspirations by external support mechanisms; this partly reflected assumptions on the part of those professionals with regard to young women and their class backgrounds (Sullivan,

2006; Lupton, 2004). Such assumptions and subsequent practice act, in some cases, in opposition to wider policy aiming to raise youth aspirations, particularly that aimed at socially disadvantaged pupils (e.g. DCSF, 2007a). No participant in my study was encouraged to consider 'higher' aspirations than those they shared nor were they motivated to aim for higher educational qualifications (although in Eleanor's case, her aspiration to become a doctor was high status in the first instance). In Carley's case, she was supported to reengage in her school, which contributed to her realising her original aspiration of nursery nursing, so this was a success in terms of helping her to *realise* her aspirations, but not in raising them.

This highlights an important point: the policy focus on raising aspirations seems to fall short at supporting the *realisation* of these aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Where aspirations are most fragile is the point at which young people must act to achieve them, which is affected by the young person's learner identity (including their academic self-concept and self-efficacy) (Raphael Reed, Gates and Last, 2007; Rees *et al.*, 2006; Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004), social capital, and support from significant others (including family, peers, school) (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002; Archer *et al.*, 2005*).* Whilst some of the participants felt information, advice and guidance (IAG), in the form of Connexions at school, was helpful and occasionally a practical support (e.g. filling in college application forms, receiving requested information), they suggested it came too late in their school career. They had already chosen GCSE options and had an idea of potential future education/employment; most participants would have appreciated an opportunity to discuss GCSE subject choices, explore career pathways etc prior to year 10, thus avoiding potential foreclosing of future options based on ill-informed or misguided GCSE choices. An overwhelming feature of most participants' stories is a lack of information about *how to achieve* their aspirations (until their Connexions appointment at the end of Year 11). If young women are to be encouraged to move beyond traditional discourses of femininity, then IAG (whether through Connexions or an alternative means) should occur earlier in their education (discussion later in this chapter will highlight the significance of such a support mechanism).

There is not a straightforward relationship, however, between access to appropriate IAG and developing and/or raising young women's aspirations. Young women need exposure to a variety of working role models in the first instance in order to recognise the range of professions which exist; this exposure is affected by social capital (Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007). Participants who experienced bridging social capital (Eleanor, Clare and Val), which is linked to shorter periods of unemployment and raised expectations and

aspirations; the mothers of Val and Clare were vital in providing their daughters with opportunities to associate with people outside their immediate communities. For Val, this was exposure to health and social care professionals as a result of her mother's role as full time carer to her brother[26]; for Clare, her engagement in amateur performing arts across the region, made possible by her mother[27], offered opportunities to work with people from all backgrounds, professions etc; Eleanor benefited from her parents' professional roles in health and education[28], as well as their heavy involvement with their church and its ethnically diverse congregation. Interestingly, these three participants also held higher status employment aspirations, which supports a link between the "resourceful connections" available through bridging social capital that can raise aspirations (Halpern, 2005) and help them to "…'push forward' in life." (Di Maggio, 2001, p.548). Where parents are unable to provide instances of bridging social capital, schools may be able to play more of a role in exposing their pupils to working role models; for example, organising careers events and inviting local employers from a wide range of professions to speak[29], or engaging parents in activities to increase their knowledge of education and employment opportunities in order to support their children. In sum and in accordance with other research (e.g. Schoon, 2006; Seaman *et al.*, 2006), social structures continue to influence differential access to resources and opportunities which are invaluable to developing and raising aspirations.

Whilst literature suggests holding one type of social capital over another can carry negative implications, data from Charlotte, Val, Sadie and Clare illustrates the benefit of bonding social capital for developing aspirations. All four participants gained a sense of identity through the close networks, communities etc in which they engaged; Val, Charlotte and Clare in particular were very comfortable with the pathways their lives were taking, reassured by the experiences of family, peers etc before them, acting as a protective factor against external influence (Ball, 2003). This could be considered both a strength and a weakness of bonding social capital; their sense of collective worth and identity gives some of these young women positive self-concepts, an understanding of where they 'fit' and (in some cases) the confidence to pursue the trajectories they aspire to. However, the very same familiarity and belonging can restrict exposure to alternative avenues of education and employment (Stantonj-Salazar, 1997, in Marjoribanks, 2003). The stories of Charlotte and Clare represent the 'best of both worlds' – security and a sense of belonging as a result of bonding social capital, with a strong female role model in

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[26] A by-product of her family situation, not an active pursuit on her mother's behalf.
[27] A conscious, active pursuit on her mother's behalf.
[28] Reflective of her parents' investment in their own education.
[29] Some schools in the North East have used Aim Higher funding to bring in local entrepreneurs to speak with secondary school pupils.

their mothers, enabling bridging social capital. Both young women benefit from mothers who motivate them to achieve through the "encouragement and expectation" they communicate (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002, p.101) and by being active in making opportunities available for their daughters[30]. Sadie had a similarly strong female role model in her sister (Robb *et al.*, 2007), although at times in Sadie's biography it seemed her sister's ideas, aspirations and expectations for Sadie overtook her own; this restricted her aspirations somewhat because her sister had experienced only one profession in her employed life. Overall, the benefits enjoyed by young people with a sufficient balance of bonding and bridging social capital are illustrated in participants' stories, which are in support of existing evidence (e.g. Schmuecker, 2008; Stevens *et al.*, 2007). However, I would argue the 'negative' outcomes of 'too much' bonding social capital are counterbalanced by the strong sense of identity and belonging which it brings to the young women in my sample from working class backgrounds; it is a double-edged sword whereby this connectedness to their community gives them a strong grounding, a sense of collective identity, which can aid positive self-concepts, yet it can also encourage them to remain with the familiar and restrict their potential.

5.3   Social constructs of youth and effects of labelling

The stories of Val, Carley and Sadie demonstrate the potential consequences (benefits and missed opportunities) arising from the process of 'labelling' young people in the school system (Skopalová, 2010). They show a complex picture of factors influencing the immediate context of education practice, including media and policy discourse which create and distribute particular constructs of childhood/youth (Wyness, 2006; James and James, 2004; Gittins, 1998) and young people's aspirations i.e. defining what it is to be a young person and how this experience should pan out across youth into adulthood. When young people do not conform (for example, under achiever, gifted/talented, truant, offender) they are labelled such that they do not affect the socially constructed view of childhood/youth. Carley's school refusal following bullying meant she fit the official 'NEET' label (as a victim of others' actions); Sadie's truancy and display of hyper-heterosexualised femininity (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007; Connolly and Healy, 2004) earned her a label as 'disengaged/underachieving'; Val's good record, positive attitude and 'niceness' left her invisible to teaching staff as she was labelled 'good enough' to succeed on her own merit. Their data showed this labelling (whether acknowledged by the participants themselves) affected their access to support, resources, opportunities etc in school. Carley's NEET label meant she received very intense one-to-

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[30] For Charlotte, Travellers North East gave her mother the tools with which to do this for her daughter.

one support over an extended period to reengage her in education, gain qualifications and proceed to post-16 education. Sadie's experience was vastly different[31]; she received no school intervention to address the reasons for her truancy, no one-to-one support to catch up with missed school work or to help identify her strengths and skills etc. Val's story is similar to Sadie's; with no encouragement offered by her school because she was judged to be 'good enough' to get by as a self-motivated pupil, engaged in extra-curricular activities, from a 'good' background etc. She did not demand attention and was rendered invisible by assumptions made by teaching staff about her needs. When Val's physiotherapy aspiration was 'damaged', she had no school support (nor anyone at school who had knowledge of this aspiration) to discuss this with or through which to secure similar work experience.

In observing the journeys of all six young women, connections can be made between social constructs of childhood/youth created and distributed through policy and media discourse, their influence upon education practice in the classroom (e.g. resource allocation) and the subsequent implications for young people in school. In this way, such discourses are "not only a rhetorical matter … [they] have very material effects." (Moreau, 2011, p.165). The focus of education policy is upon young people's *future* worth as adults in the labour market, and the associated practice upon gaining qualifications to achieve this. Related to this is the marketisation of education (Gewirtz, 2000) whereby schools are ranked through league tables by pupil results. The result of this combination of factors, as participant data illustrates, is uneven distribution of resources and its associated negative impact upon their ability to develop and realise their aspirations. Those young people who fall outside of 'very good/very bad' extremes are allocated appropriate resources (Carley), whilst the lack of support for pupils like Sadie and Val is justified as a consequence of their label (i.e. truant, 'good enough').

5.4 Normalising aspirations

The expectations placed upon young people as a result of the policy and media discourse discussed previously have implications for the very type of aspiration which is acceptable for a young person to have. In terms of aspirations for education and employment, there is a pressure to 'aim high', which is a message directly relayed to pupils in school through various means (but encouraging young people to push themselves to achieve and aim to

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[31] It is difficult to comment on individual schools' provision for pupils who disengage from schooling (whether occasional truant or permanently) as I did not gather data from these institutions. However, what influenced the aspirations for education and employment of Sadie and Carley was their *individual perception* and *experience* of such provision.

be the best they can is not the concern here). The missing element is how to individualise this approach so that each pupil is encouraged to aspire to a trajectory in which they are interested, that reflects their skills set, that helps them to manage the journey (including setbacks), and does not stifle their passion and individuality. In their desire to 'fit in' and reflect desirable norms (e.g. as a pupil, as a young women, as a Traveller etc), some participants demonstrated conflicted aspirations; for example, Sadie's aspirations were changeable and Val's were fragile. Both young women felt a pressure 'to aspire'[32] and, on occasion, it would seem this led them to make misinformed choices about education or to feel uncomfortable about their 'lack' of/'low' aspiration.

Recent policy is accused of attempting to resocialise working class values by universalising middle class values, attitudes and behaviour (Gewirtz, 2000); so, these normalising assumptions around aspirations for education and employment translate as all young people should aspire to high status careers and the necessary qualifications to achieve this, and those who do not are judged as lacking/deficient (Archer *et al.*, 2005). The message conveyed to young people, and understood by some of the participants, is that 'high' aspirations are for post-16 qualification, attendance at university and securing a professional career. When Val aspired to be a physiotherapist, she was happy to discuss this and her plans to achieve it; when this aspiration was damaged, she lost direction and felt pressure to think of another aspiration for the sake of it. The effect on Sadie was the opposite; with no single career in mind and no external support to discuss her skills, interests etc. Sadie's aspirations would change regularly and she often had no idea how to achieve them, therefore did not take steps to realise them. This pressure to aspire may have been felt more keenly by Sadie and Val as they were approaching an important transition from compulsory to post-16 education; they lacked the IAG and/or key contact (a knowledgeable other, external to the young person's family/friends; see following section) to negotiate this journey, added to this the pressure they felt to aspire 'to something'. Carley's experience differs, however, largely as a result of the intervention following her disengagement from school. The subsequent one-to-one support established a relationship with her Connexions PA in which they identified her interests and skills, and enabled her to work towards achieving her aspirations. Charlotte's journey also benefited from external support, although not directly for her, but via her mother's experience of targeted provision for Travellers (i.e. recognised, understood and

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[32] I did question whether engagement in my research intensified this feeling for the participants. I discussed this possibility with all the participants on more than one occasion; I debriefed at the end of each session to ensure participants were happy and wanted to continue to participate. None of the participants said they felt pressured to 'have aspirations' because of their engagement in the research; indeed, the majority felt their participation offered them an opportunity to discuss their aspirations which they would not have had otherwise, as well as an chance to ask questions about my own experiences of education and employment. See section 'Role modelling and guidance' for further discussion.

accommodated their specific needs, skills etc). Her mother's employment arose as a result of Travellers North East, with a secondary effect of providing a working role model for Charlotte and yet further reason to stay on at school.

5.5   Role modelling and guidance

The stories of all six participants highlight the significance of a key contact (a knowledgeable other, external to the young person's family/friends) and/or significant other (family/friends with relevant knowledge, connections etc). In the instances where this was present (e.g. Clare, Charlotte, Eleanor, Carley), they had a particularly positive impact upon the development and/or realisation of aspirations. Where this function was absent, or inadequate (i.e. lacked relevant information, no connection to appropriate network) (e.g. Sadie, Val), this impacted upon their developing aspirations (particularly if there is an incident of difficulty/disappointment to manage). Also, where participants did not have this 'key contact' and sought particular information regarding education and employment, they would often request it from me, particularly as the research progressed and the participant/researcher relationship developed into a reciprocal process[33]. Where possible I gave the appropriate information or directed them to the relevant source; however, I recognised that this mentor-type role would have been appreciated by most participants in my sample, offered as an external, reliable and knowledgeable source of information and support. This role should involve building a profile of that particular young person, including their background, skills set, interests etc. Programmes like Aim Higher offer funding for learning/support mentors in secondary schools, which evidence suggests is particularly beneficial for pupils from working class backgrounds with no previous experience of higher education in their family (Dodgson *et al.*, 2008). Where mentoring is offered to aid youth aspirations, efforts should be made to ensure some degree of commonality with the young people being mentored (Raffo, 2006). Furthermore, this role should offer continuity and consistency, unlike the experiences of participants with Connexions. This support role could be offered by student mentors (previous school pupils), learning support mentors (e.g. Aim Higher funded) or e-mentoring (online support) (Dodgson *et al.*, 2008).

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[33] Participants were well-informed about the research being conducted as part of a postgraduate programme of study at university. I also shared my own experiences of education and employment in the North East with participants to build rapport and clarify terms of reference when discussing aspirations. This discussion meant participants knew I was engaged in higher education and that we shared our North East origins. My younger age at the time (early twenties) also meant they had confidence in my experience at school, university and in work as recent and up to date.

5.6 Facilitating reflexivity

Eleanor and Clare share a similar belief in their ability to achieve their aspirations (their self-efficacy); indeed, they also share a range of other factors which are useful in facilitating aspirations for education and employment, including: their faith (strong sense of identity), mothers in employment (successful female role model), and the ability to reflect on their current position in consideration of their future. These similarities occur despite their different social backgrounds. This 'coming together' of positive influencers creates a space within which both young women are able to develop aspirations, plan their proposed trajectories and take steps to realise these aspirations, whilst monitoring their immediate context (e.g. achievement in school) and the wider world (e.g. regional/national labour market).

Eleanor's story represents a typical proposed trajectory of an aspirational middle class young woman as is presented in policy discourse. Clare's story offers an opportunity to observe a young woman engaged in a reflexive process; when faced with disappointment (e.g. unable to study GCSE of her choice; no theatre work experience), she reflects, seeks the necessary support and readjusts her pathway accordingly in order to continue to pursue her aspiration to work in performing arts. She does so by bringing in a level of realism as she considers the labour market (encouraged to do so by her mother) and a range of potential jobs in performing arts (e.g. performer, make-up artist, runner, stage manager, casting agent). All the while she is able to protect her aspiration (and self-efficacy) because she is engaged in this process of monitoring and readjusting. Clare's personality also played an important role as she is self-assured, driven and passionate about her interests; some of what contributes to developing aspirations remains outside the scope of a sociological study, personality is one such factor.

Eleanor also engages in a similar reflexive process. At 11 years old, she is already contributing to her higher education savings fund in order to realise her aspiration to study at university. From her initial aspiration to become a dentist, Eleanor weighed up her likes/dislikes, her ambition to 'do good' in the world, alongside her changing extra-curricular activities, hence her final aspiration to become a doctor specialising in paediatrics. Neither Eleanor nor Clare have had external support designed specifically to target their aspirations, but both have resources available to them which make this process possible (Eleanor active in her faith community; Clare active in her performing arts community). It is difficult to comment on how they learned these reflexive skills (although one can speculate regarding their parents' role), but it is apparent they are valuable to possess. All participants engaged in varying degrees of reflexivity throughout

the research period; their data demonstrates the difference in outcome which arose when they could or could not identify possible avenues for pursuing those aspirations or anticipated failure. Where participants successfully negotiated this journey, they relied upon appropriate resources (inner and external) and their aspirations (or sense of hope for their future) remained intact.

All six participant journeys suggest there is a gap in education with regard to helping young people to learn to be reflexive and engage in this process. For example: how to be active in creating their own future by coming to understand why educational qualifications are important; in appreciating their own skills set and where it needs to grow; to recognise their own interests and priorities; to consider the wider context regionally/nationally and be informed about the labour market; to be facilitated in their realisation of their aspirations. Reflexivity is, in this sense, a skill to be learned, one which could help young people develop aspirations and understand how they might realise them; yet participant data shows it is not possessed by all in equal measure (Morgan, 1999). Thus increasingly individualised accounts of youth must reflect this sense of 'bounded agency' (Evans *et al.* (2001, in MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) whereby a young person's active and rational negotiation regarding their life course is restricted to them choosing between the options available to them (Robb *et al.*, 2007).

An additional gap in terms of participants' reflexivity was their apparent lack of consideration for the potential interaction of aspirations. For example, whilst Eleanor, Clare and Charlotte identified their aspiration to have a family, they did not discuss how they would negotiate this with their aspiring professional careers; however, they did consider *where* their aspirations might take them geographically and how they might manage this. I did not pursue this potential tension as a particular line of inquiry when participants discussed wanting a family, which may account for some of this missing detail. However, I anticipate, perhaps due to their younger age, they have not yet given consideration to how they will manage their identity as 'mother' with that of 'employee'. Despite considerable efforts and legislation to equalise opportunities for women, the reality is that responsibility for childcare will usually fall to the mother. Young women may be in a better position to negotiate this situation if they recognise it as a potential tension in the first instance (Thomson and Holland, 2002), rather than being led to believe they can aspire to "unfettered careers" (McLaren, 1996, in Andres *et al.*, 1999, p.276). The emphasis today on individualised contexts of choice for young women does not acknowledge the limits within which they must carry out decisions, choices and actions

(Nilsen and Brannen, 2002). Evidence shows that there continues to be a difference between young women and men in realising their aspirations (Shapka *et al.*, 2006).

There were two 'outliers' in terms of factors anticipated to influence developing aspirations but did not play a significant role for my sample. The first is peer group; existing evidence already presents a mixed response to the influence of peers upon young people's aspirations and my research reflected those suggesting a lesser impact (Kiuru *et al.,* 2007; Robb *et al.*, 2007; Dobbs *et al.,* 2004; Payne, 2002 in Craddock *et al.*, 2007). This is not to say participants did not have close, significant friendship groups, or that aspirations were not discussed amongst them, but generally participants opted to discuss their aspirations with parents/significant others, tending to engage people older than themselves (who were presumed to have relevant experience, knowledge and potential access to resources). Clare's story illustrated how she actively selected which peer group she would discuss her performing arts aspirations with to ensure a positive response, avoiding those with negative comments. The second factor is place/locality; other research shows the influence of place upon young people's aspirations (Nayak, 2003) but that its effect is intersected by social class (Furlong and Cartmel, 1994). As a single influencer, place (in this case, the North East region) did not have a particularly notable effect on participants aspirations, but its relationship with social class did i.e. participants of lower social class tended to live in more deprived areas, with fewer local amenities, poorer public transport etc, and this did impact upon young people's access to resources for example, which affected their aspirations.

Aspirations for education and employment cannot wholly account for (un)successful transitions through education to employment; they are only part of the picture, in the same way social structures, for example, account for only part of the picture. In sum, Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990, in Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p.589) habitus captures this, as "…an embodiment of the complex amalgam of what some would call structural factors […] together with a person's genetic inheritance, all of which continually influence and are influenced by others through interaction." It is how the various influencers combine in different ways which creates unique experiences (Gutman and Akerman, 2008) that young people must negotiate and manage; this negotiation and management is the practice of reflexivity and agency by the young person. If young people are to be able to develop and achieve their aspirations for education and employment, they need a support mechanism which recognises the complexities of aspirational influences and seeks to understand the young person as an individual, rather than part of a homogenous group called 'youth'.

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5.7 Limitations

On reflection, a limitation of my study is the withdrawal of four participants in the earlier stages of the research. Four male participants were engaged during recruitment of groups A, B and C; however, three male participants withdrew at the second and third rounds of data collection. As a result, I opted to exclude the remaining male from my final thesis; gender is a significant factor influencing young people's aspirations and having only one male to six female participants in my sample did not allow sufficient analysis of this influencer as a dimension of 'difference'. Related to this is the disengagement of Charlotte at the midpoint of research, which meant she had a smaller, less detailed dataset compared with other participants. Despite this limitation, Charlotte's contribution remains a valuable one; I was pleased to be able to include a young Traveller voice in my research as there is a limited evidence base with regard to this ethnic group and their aspirations.

In my original research design, I included a feedback process for participants at research end where they could consider whether my representation of their story was accurate and to formally conclude their involvement in the research process. However, due to the length of the research period and the disengagement of participants from this process towards the end, this proved difficult to achieve and is a limitation of my study.

As part of my participatory, flexible research design, I asked participants to select their choice of 'significant other' to contribute to the study. They were free to choose whomever they wished that they judged to have had an influence upon their aspirations; most participants chose family members. A limitation here is the possibility participants chose significant others who would affirm their own contributions, voices that were concomitant with their own i.e. no dissenting voice. As participants controlled this process, I was unable to pursue any lines of enquiry I identified as significant; for example, Sadie's teacher, Charlotte's parents, Carley's parents/siblings. However, for my sample, this approach assisted our researcher-participant relationship and an open dialogue between us, which I argue was more important to the purpose of this study.

5.8 Further research

Following discussion earlier in this chapter regarding the significance of support to *realise* aspirations for education and employment, I would recommend a follow-up study of the participants in my sample to explore their continuing journeys and examine the potential impact upon youth transitions of having aspirations. All participants are now over 16 years old and are making/have made important transitions in education towards employment; a

follow-up study could explore their experiences of achieving the aspirations, or not, and how this affected their trajectories. Following the participants in the longer term still would collect data on transitions further along their life course, such as motherhood and the effects of this upon managing aspirations for education and employment. Related to this and in recognition of one of my research limitations, it would also be valuable to conduct a similar study with young men in the region. The findings of which could be analysed alongside those of this research, offering an opportunity to explore the impact of normative models of 'male/female' upon aspirations and how aspirations for a family influence male/female trajectories.

Throughout my study, I have been conscious of my position as researcher (my gender, age, social class, personal history etc) and its potential impact upon the research process. As a woman from the North East of England, with a working class background, I share many similarities with my sample of participants; I needed to be reflexive in my research practice in order to avoid any judgements/inferences, or analysis of their data based on my *own* education and employment experiences. I would like to conduct further research in this area of researcher reflexivity to examine its influence on the research process as a whole, from inception to data collection and analysis. A related aspect is the experience of participants in engaging in this study i.e. beneficence, in addition to the impact of research participation upon their developing aspirations. Participants did comment on this throughout the research period, judging the experience as positive overall, an opportunity to speak to somebody neutral and dedicate time to considering their aspirations which they would not otherwise have had.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of data collection

Group	Participant	1st round	2nd round	Ppt-led task	3rd round	4th round	5th round	6th round	7th round	Total duration
A	Clare	Aug 2006	Nov 2006	Feb 2007	Apr 2007	May 2007*	Oct 2007	Nov 2007*	Apr 2008	21 mths
	Sadie	Aug 2006	Dec 2006	Feb 2007	May 2007	Jun 2007*	Nov 2007	Apr 2008*	Apr 2008	21 mths
	Val	Aug 2006	Nov 2006	Feb 2007	Apr 2007	May 2007*	Oct 2007	Jan 2008*	Apr 2008	21 mths
B	Eleanor	Sep 2006	Jan 2007	Feb 2007	Apr 2007	May 2007*	Oct 2007	Apr 2008*	Apr 2008	20 mths
C	Charlotte	Nov 2006	Feb 2007	X	May 2007	Nov 2007*	X	Jan 2008*	X	16 mths
D	Carley	May 2007	Jun 2007	Jul 2007	Oct 2007	Nov 2007*	X	May 2008*	May 2008	12 mths

Table 7

*   Denotes data collection with significant others

X   Denotes missing data (participant did not attend)

Appendix B: Interview Schedule for Parent/Carer

School:

1. What do you remember most about being at school?

2. What did you like / dislike about school?

3. What did you think school was for when you were a child? What about now?

4. What do you think of school/education today?

Work:

1. When you were at school, was there a particular job you wanted to do when you were older? What was it? Why did you want to do this job?

2. Describe the job you do now (paid or unpaid)

3. Can you explain how you came to be in this job/ role? For example, did you need particular qualifications or experience? Support from anyone?

The North East:

1. What do you like / dislike about living in the North East?

2. Is there anything you would change about the North East?

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Pack

Centre for Public Policy
Northumbria University
Lipman Building
Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 8ST

[date]

Dear [participant],

I recently spoke with you about being involved in a piece of research I am currently working on, which explores young people's aspirations for education and employment in the North East. You kindly agreed to participate in the longer term research project and I explained I would be sending you a research pack, with details of the project itself and a consent form for you and your parent/carer to sign and return should you decide you definitely want to be involved.

Included in this information pack are details about my project, what it will mean for you to be involved as a participant, a flyer about the research, a consent form, and a return envelope.
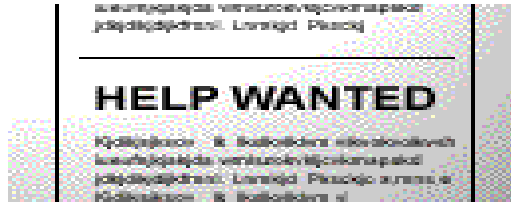
Once I receive the returned consent form, I will contact you by telephone to arrange our first meeting together.

If you or your parent/carer has any further questions about the research, please contact me by telephone, email or letter and I will be more than happy to talk in more detail about this project.

Kind regards,

Suzanne Powell

[Contact details]

HELP WANTED

Are you aged 10-14, living in the North-East and have something to say about your ambitions for the future?

- What is it like living, learning and working in the North East?
- How do you feel about school?
- What are your plans once you finish school?
- What are your goals for the future and how will you achieve them?
- What is the job of your dreams?
- What expectations do you have of the job of your dreams?
- Who/what has influenced your feelings about school and your future job?

> Adults often have a lot to say about the lives of children and young people, but **your opinion** could be different to theirs – this is **your chance** to get your ideas and thoughts across…

I'm a research student at Northumbria University and want to know about the education and employment **aspirations** of young people living in the North East today - I'm interested in what you have to say about your **ambitions** and **expectations** of **education** and **employment** in the area you live in.

If you think you might have something to say about any of this and would like to help me with my research, please leave your contact details with me and I will call/email you within the next 7 days. If you have any questions, please call or email me:

Suzanne Powell

[Contact details]
Centre for Public Policy, Northumbria University

Project Summary, Participant Rights and Consent to Participate

I am currently a research student at Northumbria University, undertaking a PhD studentship funded by Aspire. The title of my thesis is **'The 'North East Really Delivers'? Exploring the educational and employment aspirations of children and young people in the North East of England'**. I am asking 6-10 young people from the North East, aged 10-14 years old, to help with my research.

Your role…
By participating in this research, you will help me to explore what young people aspire to do at school and in their future careers, find out who or what influences these aspirations, and how much control young people have over the decisions they make and the paths they follow. It will also give you the opportunity to get your own opinion across, let others know what it's like to be a young person today and give you space to think about your own hopes and ambitions.

How long…
As a participant, you will be involved with the project for approximately 18 months. Within this time, I will contact you about 7-8 times - both face to face and by email/telephone. The amount of time you will probably spend contributing to this research is about 8-14 hours in total.

Who else…
Other young people are also participating in this research – they will be aged 10-14 years old, living in the North East and have something to say about their aspirations for education and employment.

Part of this research involves finding out who else might influence your hopes and choices for your future – for example, your brother/sister, your best friend, your teacher, your neighbour etc. Whoever it may be, I will try and make contact with them (with your permission) to speak to them about their involvement with you and how they think they affect your decisions about school and future employment.

How to communicate…
We will communicate with each other in a number of ways - here are some of them:

- Face to face, an informal chat
- By email
- Via an email discussion group (to talk with the other participants)
- Using a diary that you'd keep up to date between our meetings
- Compiling a scrap book using photos, drawings, writing, any materials

If you have any other ideas on how we can keep in touch I'd be very happy to hear them.

Where…
When we meet up, this will be somewhere you will feel comfortable to talk – it could be at Northumbria University where I have an office, in your own home, at your school (with permission), a local youth group (with permission) etc.

Your rights…
As a research participant, you will remain completely anonymous - I won't use your real name. When I write up my final report, nobody will be able to identify it is you I am talking about.

All the information you give me will remain totally confidential. I will not disclose any personal information you may give me to anybody else, including your parents. However, if you were to tell me that you were suffering any sort of abuse, I am obliged to report this to someone else – but I would talk this through with you before doing so.

If you agree to participate in this research, you can withdraw from it at any time, just tell me you no longer want to be involved and I won't contact you any further.

The data I collect from you will be securely stored at Northumbria University and destroyed on project completion. Once I have written up my final report, this will be held at Northumbria University's library.

So that I am allowed to conduct research with young people like yourself, I have been successfully CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checked and am able to go ahead with this research. My project has also been passed by Northumbria University's Research Ethics Committee.

Consent to participate…
Because you are under 16 years old, it is important you share the information in this research pack with your parent/carer so that both you and they understand what I am asking of your participation.

Once you have read and understood the information and your rights as a participant, please complete the form below – both you and your parent/carer need to sign it and then return it in the enclosed envelope.

If you have any questions before you sign below, please contact me and I'll be happy to talk it all through with you.

Suzanne Powell, Northumbria University

'The 'North East Really Delivers'? Exploring the educational and employment aspirations of children and young people in the North East of England'.

You:

I, *(print name)*…………………………………., understand the information given in this research pack and my rights as a participant. I give my consent to participate in this research project

Signed:…………………………………………………

Date:………………………………………….

Parent/carer:

I, *(print name)*…………………………………., the parent/carer of the aforementioned participant, understand the information given in this research pack and my child's rights as a participant. I give my consent for him/her to participate in this research project

Signed:…………………………………………………

Date:………………………………………….

Please return this form in the enclosed envelope (pre-paid) – I will be in touch by telephone shortly and look forward to speaking with you again!

Suzanne Powell
[Contact details]