

# **'DROPPING OUT AND DRIFTING AWAY': AN INVESTIGATION OF FACTORS AFFECTING INNER- CITY PUPILS' IDENTITIES, ASPIRATIONS AND POST-16 ROUTES**

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## OVERVIEW

This research examines the identities and aspirations of young Londoners, aged 15-17, who had been identified by their schools as 'at risk of dropping out or drifting away from education' and as 'unlikely to progress into post-16 education'. Such young people constitute a key target group within current educational policy, but their views are rarely sought or listened to.

The study was conducted over 2 years, between July 2003-2005 and was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Overall 89 young people took part, together with 19 members of staff and a small sample of 5 parents. The project utilised a mixture of qualitative methods to elicit the views and experiences of participants. Fifty-three young people were tracked using repeat interviews over the course of the project. Discussion groups were conducted with an additional 36 pupils and eight pupils completed photographic diaries. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with teachers, Connexions advisors, Learning Mentors and parents.

Section One of the report begins by providing an overview of existing literature pertaining to the focus of the study. Section Two details the methodology employed within the project and Section Three introduces issues around identifying 'at risk' young people. Sections Four, Five, Six and Seven are substantive data analysis chapters which discuss the findings in relation to the role of social and cultural factors (Section Four), school and educational factors (Section Five), aspirations and post-16 routes (Section Six) and policies aimed at increasing engagement and participation (Section Seven). The report concludes with a discussion of conclusions and implications (Section Eight).

The report is accompanied by an Executive Summary.

Further details and copies of the Executive Summary can be obtained from:

Dr. Louise Archer  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166-220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
Email: [L.Archer@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:L.Archer@londonmet.ac.uk)

## SECTION ONE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 1.1 The views of young people who 'drop out'

Young people who 'drop out' of education are a hard-to-reach group and they remain marginalised within mainstream schooling and policy. The views of these young people are often absent from discussions around policy and practice, even though 'what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important- perhaps the most important- foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools' (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996, p.1). Rudduck *et al.* (1996, p.172) state that excluding young people from consultations about school improvement is founded on an outdated view of childhood, which 'fails to acknowledge children's capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives'. Importantly, they observe that 'it is the less effective learners who are most likely to be able to explore aspects of the system that constrain commitment and progress; these are the voices least likely to be heard and most important to be heard' (p.177). They emphasise the importance of listening to young people in order to facilitate the continuation of greater proportions of young people into post-compulsory education:

' ... if we are to be confident that the vast majority of young people will commit themselves to learning while they are in the period of compulsory schooling and that they will take that commitment on when they leave school, then we have to take seriously young people's accounts and evaluations of teaching, learning and schooling' (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996: p.177-178).

As Phoenix (2000, p.95) suggests, many social policies: 'claim to be addressing the needs of particular subjects while taking little account of the subjects' constructions of self and their social positioning.' Research has suggested that working class and minority ethnic (ME) young people often resist 'top-down' educational policies, which they perceive to have little interest or relevance to their own lives (Archer *et al.*, 2003). As a result, educational policies have created 'an army of reluctant conscripts to post-compulsory education' (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p.17). Fergusson *et al.* (2000, p.285) also suggest that, for 78% of the sample in their research study, participation in FE occurs 'by default, or is ill-informed, or both', with full-time education being regarded as a 'least-intolerable option' rather than an active

preference. It is thus unsurprising to find high drop-out rates within the post-16 sector, where many 'non-traditional' learners' engagement in post-compulsory education and training is characterised by movement and disruption in and out of sites (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

This study foregrounds urban/ inner city pupils' views on the policies and strategies of which they are targets, bringing their views into the policy arenas from which they are usually excluded, and setting their voices alongside those of teachers and parents.

## **1.2 Policy context**

Issues of post-compulsory participation and social inclusion/exclusion are currently highly topical educational policy concerns. Young people who 'drop out' of education after the age of 16 are specifically targeted within the post-compulsory 14-19 policy framework (DfES, 2001), particularly since the statement of the government's target to widen participation in higher education (HE) to 50% of 18-30 year olds by the year 2010. The *Bridging the Gap* report highlighted that 'at any one time 161,000 or 9 per cent of the age group - are outside education, training and work for long periods after the school leaving age of 16' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.8). The UK government White Paper also states that 'too many young people still gain low or no qualifications and leave learning for good at 16' (DfES, 2001, p.8). And, more recently, attention has been drawn to findings that 'Nearly half of young people still do not achieve five good GCSEs at school. More still do not reach that standard in English and mathematics. And one in twenty leaves without a single GCSE pass' (DfES, 2003a, p.6). Drives to widen post-16 educational participation and to reduce 'disaffection' are also related to current policy concerns with the promotion of 'lifelong learning' and the 'learning society', and the reduction of 'social exclusion'.

As Fergusson *et al.* (2000, p.284) argue post-16 education is increasingly becoming 'compulsory' for young people: 'there are a number of elements of the new post-16 arrangements which make them inclusionary, to the extent that non-participation remains only as an extreme and residual option'. Consequently, a relatively high proportion of young people go on to post-16 education or training; in 1999 just over 70% of the population aged 17 were enrolled in full-time or part-time education in the UK. However, this figure is low in comparison with other countries: for example, over 80% of young people in the United

States, Denmark, Portugal, Australia, and Canada were enrolled in full-time or part-time education in 1999, as were over 85% in Austria and the Czech Republic; over 90% in France, Germany, Norway, Japan, and the Netherlands, and over 95% in Finland, Korea, Belgium, and Sweden (DfES, 2002a).

Research evidence demonstrates that there are clear differences between the levels of attainment and participation in education on the basis of ethnicity, gender and social class. In those schools where there are low levels of disadvantage, the pupils score on average almost twice as many GCSE points as those in schools where pupils are the most disadvantaged (OFSTED, 1997). However, recent evidence suggests that there are subtle nuances within this data, for example African Caribbean pupils from non-manual homes are consistently lower achievers than those from white backgrounds (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996). The Youth Cohort Study reveals that as well as attainment at 16 being higher for those of higher socio-economic groups, so is participation in education and training. Those with parents in manual occupations are significantly more likely to be in government-supported training or *not* in education, training or work (Pearce & Hillman, 1998) than those from non-manual backgrounds. Evidence suggests that the higher the social class background, the higher the rate of post-compulsory participation within all ethnic groups, however there are also clear differences between ethnic groups. Participation is particularly low for white people from semi and unskilled backgrounds (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996).

Participation in HE, also demonstrates class inequalities. The Dearing Report highlights the under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in HE (Dearing, 1996; see also: Archer *et al.*, 2003). Further, HE participation is lowest among working class groups resident in the inner city (Robertson, 1997). Turning to exclusions, some groups are more likely than others to be excluded from education. For example, the exclusion rate for Black Caribbean and Black Other students was three times that for white students in 2002/03, and 26.7% of exclusions took place at age 14. Boys make up around 83% of the total exclusions for each year in England and statistics indicate higher levels of disaffection among boys than among girls (DfES, 2003c). In addition, the DfES (2002b; 2004) demonstrates that girls are slightly more likely to be enrolled in post-16 education or training than boys. However, as we shall highlight later, girls often practice less visible forms of exclusion and disengagement.

The various government white papers and other related policies set out a wide range of proposals and initiatives for tackling non-progression, however, there are four key features that are pertinent to this study. The Connexions service was established in the white paper *Schools: achieving success* (DfES, 2001). It aims to 'create a comprehensive structure for advice and support for all young people from the age of 13' in order to 'make sure that far more young people continue in education and training through their teenage years until they are at least 19' (DfEE, 1999, p.9). The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) started as a pilot initiative in *Bridging the Gap* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The scheme, which has since been extended, offers payments to pupils from less affluent backgrounds who stay on in post-16 education and training. A focus on tackling ME underachievement and under-participation in post-compulsory education was set out in DfES (2001) and consolidated in the *Aiming High* scheme (DfES, 2003b), with its partner scheme *Aim Higher* (DfES, 2005) focusing on the same issues among the working class. Curriculum changes have aimed to create greater emphasis on, and opportunities for, vocational learning to try to engage under-achieving pupils (DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2003a) These changes have included vocational GCSEs plus additional work-related learning and upgrading/expansion of modern apprenticeships (Working Group on 14-19 Reform, 2004).

### **1.3 Critiques of government policy**

Despite the current focus on social inclusion, it has been argued that aspects of the government's wider educational policy discourage and decrease participation from groups who would not traditionally participate in post-16 education.

Some have criticised New Labour's policy for focusing too much on the individual, rather than taking account of structural factors that affect young people's choices, notably class, gender and ethnicity. Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p.11) state that 'young people today face new risks at school which they are increasingly expected to negotiate as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity'. Similarly, Ball *et al.* (2000, p.147) argue that 'in our research we increasingly felt it necessary to eschew the overly simplistic characterizations of young people evident in policy documents – as individual, rational calculators or human capitalists'. Phoenix (2000) argues that without consideration of factors such as gender and ethnicity, only piecemeal policy changes will be introduced, and educational policies will remain unproductive.

Criticisms have been made of the tendency in education policy to assume linear transitions from school to further education, training, or employment. Rather, it is argued, that young people's lives are often much more complicated (Barry, 2001). Fergusson *et al.* (2000, p.286) state that a model of linear transitions is not equally appropriate for all young people and argue that the experiences of 'non-traditional' learners post-16 are better labelled as 'normalized dislocation' 'characterised by a *mélange* of movement in and out of training courses, part-time, low-paid work...and employment', and therefore that 'in policy terms, mistaking marginalization as disaffection, or attempting to evaluate histories of normalised dislocation as though they were failures of transition have potentially adverse consequences' (p.304).

Policies have also been criticised for adopting normalising assumptions about the young people or groups in question. Gewirtz (2001, p.365) highlights New Labour's 're-socialisation' of the values of working class parents to 'universalise the values, attitudes and behaviour of a certain fraction of middle-class parents'. She identifies how particular characteristics of middle-class parents (for example, being active consumers in the education market; monitoring and closely policing what schools provide; possessing and transmitting appropriate forms of cultural and social capital) tend to be held up as a norm or ideal, against which other are judged to be lacking.

Finally, difficulties have been identified with applying the concept of a market in education. Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p.11), argue that 'the illusion of choice created by the marketisation of education masks the continued entrenchment of traditional forms of inequality'. Markets have brought new managerialism into education with its associated practices of target setting and league tables. Gewirtz (2000, p.311) states that target setting within education, is 'likely to lead teachers to focus on those students just below the required level, rather than the lowest-achieving students'. Target setting takes meaning out of education, 'the more specific the government is about what it is that schools are to achieve, the more likely it is to get it, but the less likely it is to mean anything' (Reay & Wiliam, 1999, p.280). The league tables have led to the labelling of many inner city schools as 'failing' or 'sink' schools, and has contributed to a 'middle class flight' from such schools and areas (Reay, 2004a). Such schools become alienated further, as the middle classes have strategies for managing the market, such as moving house, and also the financial resources needed to

implement these strategies (Ball, 2003). Reay (2004a, p.2) argues that 'race and racism, as well as social class and gender, enter powerfully into representations of 'good' and 'bad' schools'. She highlights how such (predominantly working class) schools become 'pathologised spaces' (p.3) for the middle classes.

These policies impact on schools in many ways, influencing the types of schools available, their institutional and academic cultures, staffing, curriculum and teaching methods. All of these can have a profound effect on pupils' achievements and consequently students' decisions to continue education post 16. The research literature on these is summarised in the next section.

#### **1.4 The role of the school in producing educational failure and non-progression**

Pupil's choices to participate in post-compulsory education are inextricably bound up with actual and perceived educational failure and engagement with school life; 'observable patterns of disaffection can be traced to institutional determinants as much as to individual background and behaviour' (Pearce & Hillman, 1998, p.29).

There is a general belief in educational research that an effective school is likely to involve strong leadership, be well organised, have a united staff, with a positive ethos and high expectations of students (Blair, 2001; OFSTED, 2002). A recent OFSTED (2002, p.3) report found that 'critical to the success of the school are leadership and management that gain the confidence of parents and pupils and establish their credibility in the communities they serve'. Recent research also reveals that an effective school, in terms of engaging with pupils, needs to have an inclusive ethos. OFSTED (2002) found that key to the success of Black Caribbean pupils' was teachers' positive relationships with pupils, a relaxed and sociable learning environment, and a close monitoring of the academic progress of pupils. Supporting this, Blair (2001) found that effective schools for Black children recognised and addressed specific problems faced by black girls and boys and had policies in place to uphold this. Not only can the ethos of the school affect academic results, but it can also affect students' post 16 choices (Foskett *et al.*, 2004).

The demographic make-up of staff also affects the culture of the school and hence impacts on students' ability to fit comfortably in the school. A report on black teachers in London highlights how all ME groups are under-represented in the profession and that experienced black teachers are substantially less likely to be in positions of authority in schools (Ross, 2003). It appears that in many London schools, whether consciously or not, institutionalised racism is present (Brah & Minhas, 1985).

Staff turnover also impacts on the culture of the school community and consequently pupils' engagement with school. A report on teacher supply and retention in London (Hutchings *et al.*, 2000) found that London schools, particularly, are characterised by a high proportion of young teachers who do not expect to stay, and had higher rates of turbulence and turnover than other areas (Mirza, 1992; Reay, 2004a). Archer's (2003a, p.65) study of inner city school leaver's aspirations found that the issues surrounding short term and supply staffing within the school seemed to impact negatively on student's self esteem as they felt 'abandoned' by teachers.

Having an appropriate curriculum and teaching methods also impacts on pupils' engagement. Mirza (1992, p.39), in her observations of teaching in one 'failing' school, stated that 'the lessons that I observed were often dull and uninteresting, the outcome being bored, non-responsive or sometimes disruptive pupils'. A number of studies have addressed how curriculum content can further alienate and marginalise certain ME groups. Blair (2001) argues that for many, 'their histories are excluded from what is considered to be valuable knowledge' and the National Curriculum is mainstreamed and often 'Eurocentric' and inhibits attempts to deviate from this.

The placing of children in teaching groups according to their perceived ability, whether by setting, streaming or banding, is a common feature of UK secondary schools. However, research has failed to demonstrate that ability grouping raises achievement, in contrast, it has shown that setting diminishes achievement and motivation for some students in lower *and* in higher sets (Boaler, 1997a). Not only can the process of setting lead to the fixing of potential achievement, and hence opportunities, but it can also have negative effects on those placed in lower groups in terms of their learner identities, contributing to processes of polarisation and to feelings of disaffection (Ball, 1981; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). Some research suggests that

minority children, and specifically black children, are more likely to be placed in lower sets, even when their test results suggest a higher placing would be appropriate (Gillborn, 1997; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996). Evidence also suggests that working class underachievement can be linked to those children being placed in lower sets (Ball, 1981; Boaler, 1997a; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Hence, research suggests that ability grouping maintains inequalities – and yet, as Boaler (1997b) highlights, there has been a recent increase in ability grouping. This increase, she argues, is linked to the marketisation of education because schools have been forced to turn their attention away from equality issues to focus more exclusively on academic success.

Teachers' differential treatment of pupils from different backgrounds can also have a detrimental effect on pupils' achievement and engagement with school. A number of studies have linked the low achievement of working class pupils to teachers' lower expectations of them. For example, Gore's (1997) study found that (middle class) teachers had distinct impressions of working class children as being 'different' from them and their own children, describing them as 'poorly educated' due to their 'poorly educated' parents, and describing their schools as 'rough'. Gore argues that these attitudes affected pupil achievement, demonstrating how teachers in predominantly middle class schools often had higher expectations of middle class pupils and gave them more attention with regard to preparation for examinations.

Blair (2001, p.28) argues that teachers often do not understand the cultures and learning styles of black children, and may therefore 'misinterpret their behaviour and impose sanctions more frequently'. She suggests that in order for black children to be successful they may need to 'act white'. It is difficult to unpick the causes of this differential treatment, from incidences of overt racism, through to subtle cultural misunderstandings (Brah & Minhas, 1985). However, the consequences can serve to alienate certain groups from mainstream education.

The dominance of boys in secondary classrooms is well documented. Through being disruptive and noisy, boys tend to gain more teacher attention in the secondary classroom, although the quality of this attention may be questioned (Younger *et al.*, 1999). Carter and Osler (2000) argue that in a school context, as well as a humanitarian context, rigid discipline reduces positive relationships and responses. Smith and Tomlinson's (1989) study revealed

that children are more likely to dislike school if they are often criticised, and found that a high level of criticism is associated with a poor level of achievement. However, Osler and Vincent (2003) highlight that it is important not to forget issues surrounding girls and exclusion. For example, they found inequalities in careers advice given to girls and boys, discovering that girls were more likely to be ill informed about further education and training options.

The preceding sections have explored the impact of both government policy and school factors on young people's engagement – within which structural inequalities related to social class, gender and ethnicity have emerged as important concerns. The remainder of this literature review focuses specifically on these issues of social class, 'race'/ethnicity and gender.

## **1.5 Social class and schooling**

Social class is a widely used- but highly contested- concept; 'although most people have some understanding of the 'class system' there is no single scale upon which everyone is agreed' (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996, p.17). Much work in education uses eligibility for free school meals as a marker of class, but it is debatable whether this indicates class or poverty, although the two are inextricably linked. In policy discourses, class is often masked; it is common for class to be synonymous with the terms 'social exclusion' or 'disadvantage' (Archer & Yamashita, 2003a). Yet, it has been argued that these are loaded terms that conceptualise middle class experience as normative, and depict the working classes as deficient in some way (Reay, 2004b). Common usage often tends to focus on employment-based divisions, such as 'manual' or 'professional' occupational groupings. In this research, however, we take the view that 'economic conditions constitute just one aspect of class rather than providing us with a comprehensive picture' (Reay, 2004b, p.140). Instead we work with a broader notion of social class that encompasses how class may be grounded within and produced through people's identities and cultural practices, rather than just their occupational backgrounds. We also consider the impact of (lack of) social and cultural capital, as well as economic capital, on young people's engagement in education.

Inequalities in economic resources have a huge impact on educational success. Lack of funds for compulsory expenditure on items such as uniform, books, photocopying and home economics ingredients, can highlight this inequality on a daily basis (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994). Poverty can also affect the learning environment at home. It may mean that pupils live in crowded and/or cramped conditions in which it is difficult to find adequate space and time for doing homework and coursework (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994). Parental involvement in children's schooling (and the provision of 'enrichment' extra curricula activities) can also cost both time and money, that less affluent parents may find difficult to afford, such as visits to libraries, museums, additional tutoring, music classes (Reay, 2004b).

It has been commonly assumed that working class groups are more interested in short-term rewards than deferred gratification for longer-term benefits (Robertson & Hillman, 1997), which has been used to explain working class pupils' preference for entering employment rather than with continuing in post-compulsory education. However, when the effects and reality of poverty are considered, the desire for the immediate alleviation of financial hardship through paid employment is understandable. Rees *et al's* (1996) study found several of their jobless school leavers had found casual work whilst still at school, and a number were involved in illegal economic activities, such as credit card fraud, which provide more money than apprenticeships. Reforms in the HE maintenance grants and student loans systems have had 'their most negative effects on the most disadvantaged students' (Callender, 2001, p.5). Research shows that fear of debt is central to many decisions by working class people to not participate in HE (Callender & Kemp, 2000; Hutchings, 2003).

In addition to economic inequalities, social and cultural inequalities can disadvantage and alienate working class families from the education system, and hence affect pupils' post-16 decisions. Middle class families arguably carry more *social capital* (that is, a 'network of lasting social relations' or a sphere of contacts, Grenfell & James, 1998, p.21) that has value in helping them to access the 'best' schools, universities and spheres of employment. Studies of access to social capital find that people with more education (and also white males) have wider social networks and more resourceful connections that can help them to 'push forward' in life (Di Maggio, 2001, p.548). *Cultural capital* is also held unevenly across social class and is implicated in the perpetuation of educational inequalities. Cultural capital refers to the 'knowledge, language and culture [...] that guides the decisions made and actions taken' by

certain social groups (Archer, 2003b, p.17). Hence middle class families tend to benefit from their superior knowledge and understanding of the education system and post-16 routes, which they can use to maximise their child's educational choices. This knowledge and understanding can be backed up by economic capital (to purchase the best options and safeguard against failure) and social capital, enabling middle class families to push their children ahead in the educational 'game'.

Bempechat and Ginsburg (1989, p.3) argue that working class parents do value their children's education but 'tend to feel less empowered in dealing with the children's teacher and the demands of the school'. Reay (2004b) notes the middle class trait of 'pushing' or demanding certain educational 'rights' for their children (for example, the scarce resource of one-to-one special needs support) can set the middle class child ahead of others (e.g. working class children) who also facing difficulties but whose parents do not 'push'. In Reay's study on mothers' involvement in schooling, it was middle class women's confidence, their self presentation as 'entitled' and their clearly articulated knowledge of the system and how it works, that enabled their children to get ahead.

Differences in cultural capital also play out within post-compulsory educational choices, as working class families may lack information about HE opportunities and may be unfamiliar with the system due to no family histories of participation (Archer *et al.* 2003). For example, Reay's (1998) study revealed that many working class students did not know the difference between pre- and post-1992 universities.

It has also been argued that the education system constitutes an essentially middle class space, within which working class people may feel 'othered'. Lynch and O'Neill (1994, p.318) highlight that 'working class people who succeed in the education system have to abandon certain features of their background' thus 'their defining identity in social class terms is automatically changed by virtue of their educational success'. Indeed, the identity dilemmas and contradictions experienced by working class people who have 'made it' into higher education and academia are highlighted in a range of texts (e.g. Mahoney & Zmroczek 1997; Hey 2003) and research evidence indicates how for some working class people (but particularly men), higher education is resisted because it is viewed as a potential threat, or

'loss' to working class identity (Archer, Pratt & Phillips, 2001; Archer, Hutchings & Leathwood, 2001; Archer & Leathwood, 2003).

Archer and Yamashita's (2003a, p.60) study of inner city school leavers in a deprived, multi-ethnic inner London borough found many, specifically working class, pupils had a feeling of not being 'good enough' for education and of 'knowing their limits'. Research into working class attitudes to HE shows that many feel uncomfortable with the idea. University is seen as a distant, unattainable, 'unreal' world', as 'snobby' and 'middle class' and hence not suited to them (Metcalf, 1997). Young working class people may also face family and community opposition to the idea of going to university because it would entail getting 'above your station' (Archer & Leathwood 2003). In some cases those who chose to get a job rather than stay in education were seen as choosing a more adult route (Archer & Yamashita, 2003a).

Working class constructions of identity are also bound up with locale. In Archer and Yamashita's (2003b, p.66) study the pupils saw their locale as a 'terrible' area and 'terrible' school but at the same time didn't want to leave as they were 'used to it'. Locale was also a part of identity with reference to university choice: 'only working class students talked in terms of geographical constraints' (Reay, 1998, p.523). They preferred to attend somewhere nearby due to it being cheaper to live at home, but also more a sense of feeling security and familiarity (see also Pugsley 1998).

## **1.6 Gender and ethnicity**

### **Masculinities**

The interplay between education and masculinities is complex. Connell (1989, p.291) states that 'schools have often been seen as masculinity-making devices'. However, within the context of school, boys also form their own masculinities, with relation to each other and in relation to femininities. Masculinities are positioned around social power, which the school system is delivering to those deemed to be educational 'successes'. Other masculinities can then form as a claim to other sources of power, for example through sporting prowess, physical aggression, or sexual conquest.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on boys' interaction with education, particularly in the media, through fears of boys' 'underachievement'. Although this notion of boys' 'underachievement' is contested and controversial (Epstein *et al.*, 1998), the dominant view of boys as 'underachieving' has captured the public consciousness. A popular explanation for 'underachievement' is that boys engage in 'laddish' behaviour, and peer pressure to conform to a 'macho' masculinity that rejects academic work. 'Laddish' constructions of masculinity have been identified as problematic not only in relation to education, but also potentially damaging other boys and girls:

'[...] non-laddish boys, who are often subject to ridicule, abuse and physical bullying by more laddish boys, and [...] girls, who are marginalized by boys' dominance of the classroom, and who may also be the victims of their sexism and misogyny' (Francis, 2000, p.30; see also: Salisbury & Jackson, 1996).

Archer and Yamashita (2003b), in their research on inner-city masculinities, maintain that territory and locality are central to boys' identity constructions, and that these are embodied through speech, dress, and 'style', which combine to create a 'bad boy' masculinity. This masculinity has great power and attractiveness for boys and their heavy investment in this identity, situated outside of the education context in the local area, may form part of their resistance to school or work. In addition, the boys' repeated experiences of educational 'failure', and thus their entrenched sense of deficit regarding education, can increase investment in such identities outside of education.

In this research we are sensitive to the ways that ethnicity intersects with gender and specific racialised masculinities are evident in inner city pupils' interactions with education. At the same time we are mindful of the importance of challenging stereotypes about various pupil groups (Sewell & Majors, 2001).

Sewell (1997) investigates the dual identity of Black young men, arguing that they have become the 'heroes' of popular youth sub-culture, while being 'sinners' in the classroom. He maintains that racialised/sexual discourses regarding Black masculinity, which focus on the body and not the mind, have influenced the academic and social performance of African Caribbean boys, as 'representations of Black masculinity have made African Caribbean boys in Britain too "sexy" for school' (p.ix). Sewell argues that in the UK Black masculinity is only in dichotomous terms, as either 'like the White Man', or the caricature of the street rebel

- whereas in reality, the boys in his study hated both extremes. 'Neither related to their real lives and experiences. They were imposed masculinities, which came from teachers and peer groups' (p.174). Rather, the boys were fighting against narrow racialised masculinities, and trying to assert their own constructions of masculinity, all of which detracted from their engagement and interaction with education. Gillborn (1997, p.380) also examined the masculinity of Black students in schools, arguing that 'Black students are frequently portrayed as conflicting with the behavioural requirements of mainstream schools', and thus that there is a 'relatively high level of tension, even conflict, between white teachers and African Caribbean students'. With Sewell (1997), Gillborn (1997) maintains that teachers' discrimination against Black pupils is often fuelled by the persistent myth of Black males as physically powerful and prone to violence.

Asian pupils also often experience schools as racist institutions (Gillborn 1997), but this racism is experienced differently from their Black counterparts. Archer (2003a, p.1) argues that, 'in educational terms, Muslim boys have been identified as under-achieving, and problematic pupils, suffering high rates of school exclusion and low rates of post-16 progression'. A shift in popular discourse can be traced, from notions of Asian pupils as 'behavers and achievers' to more recent distinctions between non-Muslim Asian 'achievers' and Muslim 'believers', the latter being demonised and subject to Islamophobia. Archer also shows how the boys' constructions of *racialized* identities are integral to their production of patriarchal hierarchies, in which Muslim masculinity with defined through paid employment, and the duty of 'protecting' Muslim women.

Narrow and dichotomous views of minority ethnic pupils have been noted across a wide range of pupils- even among higher achieving pupil groups, like the British Chinese. Archer and Francis (2005), for example, discuss teachers' tendency to assume a dichotomous conceptualisation of British Chinese masculinity, in which British Chinese boys are regarded as 'naturally good' and not 'laddish', compared to a minority of 'bad' boys whose laddishness was attributed to membership of a multiethnic peer group.

### **Femininities**

It has been suggested that working hard at school fits more easily with dominant 'accepted' constructions of femininity than masculinity, and, while girls as well as boys are at risk of

being constructed as 'swots', girls are not under the same pressure as boys to avoid commitment to schoolwork (Francis, 2000). Epstein *et al.* (1998) argue that girls tend to have higher educational aspirations than boys, and that these, along with the removal of previous barriers to girls' educational success, have led to high levels of achievement among girls. This has led much research to ignore girls and the ways in which 'girls remain second-class citizens in education and beyond' (Paechter, 1998, p.1).

Francis (2002, p.75) demonstrates that despite girls' more ambitious occupational choices than previously, they continue to predominantly aspire to occupations that could traditionally be seen as 'feminine' and the choices of girls and boys 'still reflect to some extent a deeply embedded gender dichotomy', which perpetuates inequalities of power and status.

Osler and Vincent (2003) show that problems –such as bullying- among girls are often more 'subtle' than among boys, and thus not easily recognised by teachers. They illuminate how girls form one quarter of formal, permanent, disciplinary exclusions from school in England, and that the number of girls excluded rises sharply during adolescence. In addition to comprising this significant minority of formal exclusions, girls are often more vulnerable to non-formal types of exclusion, including truancy and school drop out due to pregnancy. However, often girls do not receive the help they need, as much of the help available to young people through LEAs is generated by overtly challenging behaviour, more commonly exhibited by boys, and by disciplinary exclusion.

Class also interacts with gender to affect the way many girls experience and engage with education. For example, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001, p.214) demonstrate how the middle class girls in their study had to deal with the weight of parental expectations, and that, particularly for working class girls 'the route to upward mobility through higher education for women involves a difficult emotional trajectory and necessitates a transformation in classed subjectivity'. Thus femininities are classed and, like masculinities, they are also racialized.

Mirza (1992, p.189) argues that Black women epitomise the lack of meritocracy in our society: 'they do well at school, contribute to society, are good, efficient workers yet, as a group, they consistently fail to secure the economic status and prestige they deserve'. She

demonstrates that 'young black women, whatever the occupational status of their parents, maintained high social class aspirations' (p.190); 74% of the young women in her study aspired to occupations in social class groupings one or two. They held a positive attitude to education, and a view of a lack of constraint on female labour market participation. However, Mirza (1992) further shows that the young women's experience of schooling restricted their occupational aspirations and expectations. Schools failed their Black pupils with regard to information, advice, and educational preparation. Much of the girls' time at school was spent using strategies trying to avoid the effects of racist and negative teacher expectations. In addition, 'a racially and sexually segregated labour market...ensured limited occupational opportunities open to young black women' (p.191). The occupational outcomes of the young black women in her study, four years after leaving school, clearly did not reflect their educational potential or achievements.

Brah and Minhas (1985, p.15) highlight areas of concern for teachers with relation to schooling for Asian girls. 'Asian girls are not a homogenous category. They are identifiable, for instance, by religion, sect within a religion, linguistic group, caste and by the country from which their families originate.' However, in an educational setting, Asian girls tend to be treated as a homogenous group, often labelled as 'passive' or 'docile' in the classroom and thus systematically forgotten or ignored. When Asian girls do challenge this stereotype of being passive, they are dealt with more severely than others. Parmar and Mirza (1983) found that this stereotype impacted on careers advice, as Asian girls were often told that their high career aspirations were unrealistic, due to the expectation that they will be married 'off' and confined to the domestic sphere. Similarly, Gillborn (1997, p.395) notes how 'teachers frequently assume Asian communities to be excessively authoritarian, emphasising narrow, restrictive expectations for their children, who are thought to be raised in families dominated (sometimes violently) by the rule of the father'. Similarly, Shain (2003) argues that the discourse of pathology in which Asian girls are seen as caught between the two worlds of home and school, is a powerful and central reference point in popular conceptions of Asian family life and femininity in the UK. However, while Asian girls, being stereotyped as passive, are often invisible to teachers, they are very visible to white peers, often experiencing racial harassment.

Similarly, among higher achieving British Chinese pupils, Archer and Francis (2005, p.165) note teachers' tendency to use negative constructions of British Chinese femininity. They state that these centre 'around remarkably homogenised representations of British Chinese girls as 'passive' and quiet, 'repressed', hard-working pupils'. Thus again, stereotypes of Asian girls' feminine identities affect the ways in which they are able to interact with education.

## SECTION 2

### METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted over 2 years (July 2003 - June 2005) and was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The research had the purpose of exploring the identities and aspirations of young London pupils (aged 15-17 years) who had been identified by their schools as ‘at risk of dropping out or drifting away from education’ and as ‘unlikely to progress into post-16 education’. Overall 89 young people took part in the study, together with 19 members of staff and 5 parents. As detailed further below, a mixture of qualitative methods were used to tap into the views and experiences of the young people, including individual interviews, discussion groups and photographic diaries.

Respondents were sampled from six London schools (two schools in North London, one in central London, one in East and two in West London). Interviews were conducted by one of four interviewers (two white women, one black Caribbean woman and one Turkish man). All interviews and discussion groups were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Parental consent was obtained for all participants and the young people chose their own pseudonyms.

#### **Individual Interviews with Pupils**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 53 young people from Years 10 and 11 (14-16 years old). Each pupil was tracked over the course of the project (with each young person being interviewed 3 times<sup>1</sup>). All of the young people were from ostensibly ‘working class’ backgrounds. In terms of gender and ethnicity, the sample comprised 23 girls and 30 boys, (of whom 26 were White UK; 11 Black African/ Caribbean; 6 mixed ethnicity; 4 Asian; 3 Middle East; 3 White Other<sup>2</sup>). 26 pupils were in Year Eleven at the start of the project and 27 were in Year Ten. The sample comprised 5 pupils from Blackwell Street School; 10 from Cowick School for Girls; 11 from Littleton School for Boys; 9 from Riverway School; 10 from Hillside Park School and 8 from Eastleigh Central School.

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<sup>1</sup> Where possible – some were inevitably lost as they moved away or could not be contacted

<sup>2</sup> Pupils were asked to self-define their ethnicity, and these personal descriptors are used in the rest of the report. However, for ease of comprehension, here we have imposed generic, broader groupings.

### **Pupil Discussion Groups**

Eight discussion groups were also conducted with 36 additional young people (22 boys and 14 girls). In terms of ethnicity, the discussion groups comprised: 20 White UK; 7 Black African/ Caribbean; 4 mixed ethnicity; 2 Asian; 2 White Other pupils. Six of the discussion groups focussed generally on aspirations (e.g. what pupils felt to be im/possible, un/desirable; influencing people and factors, what encourages or discourages particular choices and routes) and two discussion groups focused additionally on experiences of vocational education and its impact on their choices and aspirations.

### **Photographic Diaries with Pupils**

Eight pupils also completed photographic diaries: Jane, Tim, Nathan (Hillside Park); Nadia (Blackwell Street); Melissa (Eastleigh Central), Babu, Lacie and Lee (Riverway). Three other pupils (Mark, Hapsa and Jermina) also agreed to participate, but did not complete the exercise. Jermina was truanting school at the time and could not be contacted, Hapsa subsequently decided she did not want to take part, and Mark took the camera to take photographs but failed to return the camera or his photographs.

Participating pupils were all given a camera (complete with film and built-in flash) and were asked to take photographs representing 'a day in my life' over an agreed 24-hour period. It was emphasised that the young people could take photographs of whatever they liked or felt to be important, although they were reminded that the exercise pertained not only to school but could also include their life outside school. A researcher returned to school the following day (or at an agreed point) to collect the camera and film. The research team took responsibility for getting the films developed, ensuring that each pupil was provided with their own set of photographs to keep. Each pupil was then interviewed about their photographic diary. Pupils were asked to talk about each photograph in turn, with the interviewer exploring themes and motivations with the pupil. The young people were also asked about who or what they had *not* taken photos of, and why, and what they would have perhaps liked to have done, and why/not.

### **Interviews with Staff**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 members of staff, including head teachers, heads of year, subject teachers, inclusion managers, learning mentors and Connexions advisors.

Of the staff who were interviewed, there were eleven women and eight men, of whom eleven identified as white UK, 3 as black African/ Caribbean, two as Turkish and one as White Other (with information missing from two members of staff).

Staff were asked about their views of factors affecting pupils' engagement and post-16 routes and with regard to government policies such as the EMA. Staff were asked to provide a general context to their own work and to the school or unit where they worked and were invited to identify key issues from their perspective. Connexions Advisors were asked to talk in depth about their role as a Personal Advisor and their views on the service.

### **Interviews with Parents**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of five parents. This sample comprised 4 White UK mothers and 1 Bangladeshi mother, who were the parents of John, Lee, Lacie, Mike and Babu, respectively. Babu's mother was interviewed in Bengali with a translator provided by the school. Parents were interviewed about their aspirations, hopes and expectations for their children. They were also asked about their experience of the school (as a parent) and their child's learning and achievement and issues such as careers advice.

### **The Schools**

Respondents were drawn from six London schools. These schools were selected using DfES attainment statistics tables and were recorded as having results below the national average at GCSE at the time of selection. The schools were also sampled to ensure a geographical spread across the London area. Two schools were in North London, one was in central London, one in East London and two in West London. Thumbnail sketches of each school are detailed below:

**Blackwell Street School** is a mixed comprehensive that has been undersubscribed for the past few years. The school has an ethnically diverse pupil population, with a particularly large proportion of Turkish and Kurdish pupils.

**Cowick** is a single sex girls' comprehensive school that is fully subscribed. The school has an ethnically diverse pupil population and attracts pupils from across the borough.

**Littleton** is a single sex (Voluntary Aided) boys' comprehensive school that is oversubscribed. The school has an ethnically diverse pupil population and attracts pupils from both within the local estates and across from neighbouring boroughs.

**Riverway** is a (Voluntary Controlled) mixed comprehensive school with particularly low results and low rates of progression into post-16 education. The school has two main pupil ethnic groups, white working class and Bangladeshi and predominantly serves the immediate local estates.

**Hillside Park** is a mixed comprehensive school that serves a relatively small catchment area (mostly one estate) of predominantly white, working class pupils. The school is currently over-subscribed.

**Eastleigh Central** is a large mixed comprehensive school. The school has an ethnically diverse pupil population and mostly serves the local estates.

## **Ethics**

The research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Parental consent was obtained for all participating pupils. We also sought to obtain the informed consent of all pupil interviewees, for example taking care to explain the purpose and aims of the project clearly and detailing how the data would be stored and later used. All participants were assured that data would be treated in confidence and that steps would be taken to anonymise their contributions, for example through the use of pseudonyms for all interviewees, schools and local areas. The young people were invited to choose their own pseudonym. Photographs from the photographic diaries exercise are not included in this report in order to protect the identities of participants and schools.

Care was also taken with regard to how pupils were invited to take part in the study, so as not to negatively impact on their confidence and self-esteem and to avoid the possibility of setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker 1963) by labelling them as 'drop-out' pupils. The study aims were explained as focusing on aspirations, identities and post-16 choices and pupils were informed that they were selected on the basis that they were in Year 10 or 11.

An issue that arose over the course of the study was that, the study actually impacted on the destinations and aspirations of the young people who took part. Due to the repeat interview format, the young people perhaps thought more about their aspirations than they would have if they had not taken part. The repeat interviews also generated rapport between interviewers and pupils, with a few pupils approaching the interviewers for advice or information both during and after the fieldwork period. In these circumstances, the research team provided whatever information or help was felt to be appropriate and encouraged the young person to take the issue further with a relevant service (e.g. Connexions). Thus, there is a possibility that, for a small number of pupils, the process of taking part in the study actually increased their likelihood of continuing in education.

## SECTION 3

### IDENTIFYING 'AT RISK' YOUNG PEOPLE

This section precedes, and thus acts as an introduction to, the subsequent data analysis chapters. The section begins by examining the potential indicators of disengagement and non-progression from the point of view and experience of staff. It then moves on to draw the link between truancy and disengagement, outlining the young people's explanations and descriptions of how they got drawn into truancy and the different forms it can take.

#### 3.1 Indicators of 'at risk', disengagement and non-progression

There was broad agreement between education professionals as to the main indicators or warning signs of disengagement and how to identify pupils who are potentially at risk of not achieving their educational potential and/or not progressing into post-compulsory education.

The Head of Year 11 at Blackwell Street outlined two main types of pupil who tend to be at risk in this way – the non-attenders and EAL pupils with limited English:

"I would define our use of or our understanding of 'at risk' as children who are at risk of not achieving or not achieving something when they leave school at the age of 16. I would define our at risk children as our non attenders, we do have admittedly in year 11 it is a small hardcore of non-attenders but basically if they aren't here then they're not learning and then they are obviously at risk. Also I would say our at risk children are the casual admissions who come in with limited English, who can't access the curriculum."

Several teachers also pointed to a general lack of preparedness for learning as being another key indicator of a pupil who is disaffected and/or at risk of exclusion, dropping out or non-progression. This lack of preparedness comprised a combination of "low level" factors, but focused in particular on non-attendance and a lack of equipment:

"... a lot of these things are low-level things and can start in different places. So things like punctuality, lateness to lessons, not being in the correct uniform, not having the correct books, not having a bag. A tendency to be not outrageously naughty but difficult and that might lead to them not being at school, truancy from lessons or truancy or condoned truancy from school generally and then sort of an escalation into worse behaviour and so on. I think the main pointers to start with are punctuality, equipment and so on sort of the general disobeying of the rules but on a low level to start with and then it moves on." (Teacher in the Inclusion Unit).

"Well just general attitude to school, you know from the lack of uniform, lack of respect for equipment and not having equipment, not having a bag, not having a planner, not having a

pen - they're expecting all that to be provided for them, to just varying levels of you know lack of work or poor behaviour." (Head of Year 10, Hillside Park).

This lack of preparedness was seen by some as indicative of pupils' lacking responsibility or the ability to be independent learners (see also Section 5.1):

"Overall, I think these students in particular will struggle with having to be responsible and be independent. I think they expect everything given to them, they expect everything done for them. And if they don't bring the resources to their class then it is your fault and they won't take any ownership on their own position and how they are going. You know some of them aren't purely interested at all but some of them are very capable but they are going to have to change their attitude to school and their attitude as to how a school runs before, you know, they can be successful" (Head of Year 11, Cowick).

### **3.2 Truancy**

As noted in the extracts above, *truancy* was closely linked with at risk pupils. Truancy was understood by staff to be both an indicator of disaffection and a contributing factor to low achievement and subsequent disengagement. The Head of Year 10 at Cowick and the Head of Year 11 at Blackwell Street both made a clear distinction between the "significant minority" of "hardcore truants" who would engage in severe, persistent and prolonged periods of absenteeism and "the general apathy of some students getting into school", for example in terms of lateness and skipping odd lessons. Linked to this apathy were issues such as absenteeism sanctioned by home. There was a division of opinion as to whether the issue of truancy increases or decreases between Years 7 to 11. Some staff felt that prolonged periods of truancy became less frequent in Year 10 and particularly in Year 11. This was partly because persistent truants tended to be shifted onto college release vocational courses, but also because truancy was felt to become more selective in the approach to GCSE examinations, being reduced to "bunking off or skipping the lessons they don't want to go to" (Learning Mentor, Eastleigh Central). However, others felt that truancy could often be cumulative. As the Head of Year 10 at Cowick school put it:

"The trouble is once they start truanting it is easier to carry on because once you've missed one lesson and then a second it gets progressively harder to catch up and so it just gets worse from there".

The majority of young people who took part in the study regularly engaged in truancy, but a small handful explicitly stated that they do not truant, for varying reasons. For example, Lucy stated "I'd rather go to class and be annoying". Lacie also maintained that she did not truant for fear of her mum:

Lacie: No, I have never bunked school, been too scared to get caught  
Int: Caught by whom?  
Lacie: My Mum  
Int: What would she do?  
Lacie: She would just tell me off and I would be grounded

The majority of young people in the project, however, talked about having poor levels of school attendance. Some of the young people truanted from specific lessons, and others missed whole days.

As is also noted in Section 4.7, many young people (and parents) blamed peer or friendship groups for encouraging their truancy. For example, Babu's mother blamed his getting in with a "wrong group of older friends" for his lack of engagement with school. The tendency to truant with friends was particularly notable among those who were absent for whole days. For example Jermina said "I used to bunk a lot with my friends in year 9. All of friends, we'd plan it and on the Monday we'd meet somewhere and go walk about and then afterwards we'd go back home and pretend we were from school". Kyle also described how truancy with friends could start fairly innocuously, as a 'good' or 'funny' idea among friends:

"Yeah it was just that she [friend] like said 'oh come out of school we can go and do this'. And when she said that like, that it sounds better than school, and I thought I could get away with it for a couple of times".

Kyle was a persistent truant and implied that one reason for this was that she had little discipline from home (or school) and little pressure to stop:

"Its so easy to bunk, no one checks up on me so.. [Int: If some one did?] Maybe it would be different now ... maybe if someone had spoken to me then I would not be in this".

Kyle expressed regret ("I wish someone had stopped me bunking in the first place") and asserted "if my little sister decided to bunk I would slap her".

Some pupils, like Peter and Kemisha, however described arriving at school some days and then deciding that they "can't be bothered" going inside the gates ("I just can't be bothered, too much work").

Among those pupils who skipped particular lessons, rather than whole days, a dislike of particular teachers or subjects was frequently given as a reason for truancy. For example, Steven explained "It was just that some of the teachers I didn't like and some of my mates were bunking and I thought I might as well bunk with them". Similarly Jermina said that now

she only skipped days when particular lessons were on, rather than engaging in sustained periods of absence:

“Yes, usually like sometimes if, like for instance on Thursday’s we have double science I don’t come to school. I just stay at home and pretend I’m ill because I don’t like science [...] Almost every Thursday I miss school. I don’t come in. Sometimes if I don’t do homework then it makes it worse. I can’t come to school so I have to stay at home instead”.

As will be noted in subsequent sections, the impact of domestic and family factors, and issues such as bullying and racism were also cited as reasons why particular pupils started to absent themselves from school.

When asked what they do when they truant, the young people mainly described ‘hanging out’ either alone (e.g. Jermina) or with friends (e.g. Babu, Kemisha, Kyle, Max, Robert). Kyle and Kemisha talked about going shopping with friends and Robert talked about going to the cinema in between lessons (“me and my friend we go um, I like films, we go to film shows... And come back for the next lesson”). But frequently truancy was also associated with time spent ‘getting into trouble’. For example Max said he “Just sat in the park and smoked” and Babu explained “We go to some park [...] we just hang out [...] and] blaze” (smoke marijuana). Pupils who truanted whole days also had to be creative in order not to get found out and returned to school:

“I go to [local area] walking about. Sometimes if the police see me they ask me what I am doing. They ask me what I am doing and how old are you and they say aren’t you supposed to be in school and I said no. And they said your age, you are supposed to be in school? And [...] I had to make up something quickly because they were going to take me back to my school. [...] They said the next time we see you, you will be in trouble (Jermina).

As will be discussed again in Section 8.3 (‘what schools can do’), contact between home and school could be effective in helping to reduce truancy. For example, Lee’s mother described how truancy was no longer a problem due to close contact between home and school:

“If he don't come to school and I don't phone the school up they will phone up and say: 'why ain't Lee at school today?' And...he has bunked off, never in the years has he done that because he knows he will get caught." (Lee’s mum, Riverway).

However, even with home and school working together, truancy can still prove to be a major and difficult issue:

“This student has a massive attendance problem we have had the educational welfare office in here. I have met with her sister [...] I’ve had dad in a number of times - basically they will send her off to school and whether she actually makes it to school or not is a different case. If she does come to school then she will take herself off and she will go wherever she wants.” (Head of Year 11, Cowick).

This report looks at some of the reasons underlying disaffection, truancy and non-progression through the perspectives of 'at risk' pupils, their parents and teachers. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, there was no single or simple reason why pupils became disengaged with schooling and no clear factor that determined progression or non-progression. Whilst the following chapters address social/cultural, education and other factors in turn, they should be read as interlocking issues. The intractability of disengagement and non-progression as an educational 'problem', resides in its grounding within multiple factors, which can act to reinforce one another and can increase pupils' vulnerability to subsequent issues or factors. For example, social and cultural factors can render a pupil more vulnerable to disengagement, with various educational or aspirational factors 'tipping the balance' one way or the other.

## **SECTION 4**

### **THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS ON DIS/ENGAGEMENT AND NON/PROGRESSION**

This section considers how social and cultural factors impacted on pupils' engagement and likelihood of progression. The generation of vulnerability and pupils' subsequent exposure to risk as a result of poverty and difficult home lives are discussed in 4.1, with particular attention given to issues around locale. The role of gender is considered in 4.2, with a focus on both masculinities and femininities. 4.3 addresses issues of ethnicity and racism, and EAL is discussed in 4.4. The role of social class cultures and inequalities is addressed in 4.5 and 4.6 considers how popular cultural identities (namely branded identities and 'bling bling' culture) can impact on disengagement and non-progression. 4.7 draws together critical moments, relating to social and cultural factors, that have prompted engagement among pupils.

These factors often combined to powerful effect, constituting as one Head of Year put it, a "whole cultural package":

"A lot of the time we're fighting what they come to us with, their baggage and it's quite difficult...So we don't just have the problems of school and what school is offering, we have the whole package that we are dealing with and it's not just a school thing, it's the whole cultural package, it's the family package, it's the peer pressure package that you are dealing with. And they all come with baggage." (Head of Year).

#### **4.1 Poverty and Vulnerability (domestic issues and 'the street')**

A number of the pupils in the study had unstable or difficult home lives that impacted on their attendance at school and their ability to engage with education. For example, Leah would miss school in order to support her mother:

"Leah ... has a very difficult home life, if mother is having a bad time and dad is having a bad time you know she will keep Leah at home more for her benefit than for Leah's benefit. [Q: Does she have any brothers and sisters?] She has got brothers and sisters but mainly she may keep Leah at home and Leah might take the brothers and sisters to school, she might pick them up, she might just stay home and keep mum company so that mum doesn't have to face everything by herself. And even when you talk to mum you know she says 'oh yes I know she has taken a lot of time out.' Yeah she's a bit hit and miss" (Head of Year 10, Cowick).

Similarly other Heads of Year in other schools identified pupils who “basically fend for themselves” due to their parents having difficulties or being absent due to working long hours (e.g. Head of Year 11, Blackwell Street described one child for whom “parental control is sadly lacking because the parents work very long hours”). Similarly, the Head of Year 10 at Littleton School felt that some pupils were “being encouraged to stay off by parents to look after siblings”.

As will be detailed further below, the effects of poverty on the young people also meant that they were susceptible to health problems and issues around risk/ safety. A few pupils had physical or mental health problems that impacted on their schooling, for example a couple were statmented for learning impairments and one of the boys at Riverway “suffers from epilepsy so has many times off because of that” (Head of Year 11).

Various pupils felt that their engagement at school had been negatively effected by issues within their home and family lives. For example, Jason said he had “a lot of family problems” in year 11 which impacted on his GCSE performance. Similarly Nadira explained in her Phase two interview “It’s like, there’s a lot of like family problems going on. Not necessarily directly to do with me but there is a lot of family things, a lot’s going wrong in my family at the moment. But, it’s like that’s kind of stressing me out a bit”. She reflected back later “I think the reason why like I fell behind in Year 10 was because of things that were happening outside school. There was a lot of family stuff happening- there were family problems and so that was important.”

Changes to family relations and bereavements were also mentioned. For example, both Nadia and Hapsa had lost a parent. Around the time of the first interview, James’ father has just come back into his life. James’ grandmother (who had been his primary carer until this point) suggested that the reappearance of his father caused a degree of upset and turmoil in James’ life, particularly because (in her view) his dad was unreliable (“all talk”) and prone to letting James down with his promises. James’ grandmother felt that he had engaged in increasingly bad behaviour particularly since the loss of his grandfather (“maybe its because his granddad is not around anymore. He died five years ago”). Quite a few pupils were from lone parent families or had experienced their parents going through difficult separations. For example, Verona lived with his father since his mum had left them when he was 4 years old to go to

live with a new partner in America. Verona was still very much upset and affected by these events, maintaining that his mum's boyfriend "took my mum away and destroyed our family".

A number of pupils talked about the effects of family ill health on their engagement and attendance. For example Jordan said she took a time off when "Nan got a bit ill". Jordan also got pregnant over the course of the project and did not return to school once she had her baby – particularly because the baby was very ill. Mark (Hillside Park) described being upset when his granddad was having chemotherapy, which caused considerable stress in the family.

Leah explained how her ability to engage or come to school had also been strongly affected after her father was attacked and stabbed while working as a mini cab driver. She described being scared to leave her parents and come to school.

"Sometimes I take off quite a few weeks it gets really bad for me. I like cry and lot and don't want to go [...] I am just all the time worrying about things [...] I just always think something is going to happen to my mum and dad after my dad had the accident."

A few pupils experienced dangerous or abusive elements in their home lives that could cause children to miss school or experience problems at school, for example in relation to anger management or mental health issues. Such pupils tended to be under the guidance of social workers or on the child protection register.

"[Amanda] lives with mum- I think mum is extremely violent towards her. If she ever gets into trouble she does get beaten up quite badly in the past". (Head of Year 11).

"Jason's got lots of influences outside – not good influences, I must say- which affect what's going on here" (Head of Year 11).

Kyle was described by her deputy head as "very bright" and "very articulate" but from a "dysfunctional family" because her sister had a baby very young and her family "drinks". By the time of the Phase 2 interviews, Kyle had "disappeared" from school altogether and had not attended since January. The research team had repeated contact with Kyle's mother who was evasive and maintained that Kyle was staying at her brother's home "because she is not at school any more".

Jermina also seemed to be having a lot of problems due to domestic issues. Jermina's father was dead and she did not get on well with her step dad.

“Because my dad is dead and I’m living with my mum and my step-dad and I don’t like my step-dad that much and my step-dad is giving my mum too much headache, they are always fighting. My mum is very unhappy with my [step] dad. They never get along so I don’t know. I want my mum to be happy again. Every time they are fighting I have to split them up and tell them to stop.”

Events escalated to the point that Jermina ran away from home after an argument with her mum about boys coming round for Jermina and the fact that her mum was not happy with Jermina having a boyfriend (“She doesn’t want to hear anything about me having a boyfriend she hates it. She’s like ‘you are 15 for god’s sake you go to school, da da da’ and so now I don’t tell her about it anymore”). Jermina left home to stay with some older friends and she did not go to school for about a month - until her mum called the police, who got a social worker involved and the school telephoned Jermina to ask her to come back. The effect of teachers and her friends calling her seemed to have an effect on Jermina and persuaded her to go home again (“The teachers were like phoning on my mobile telling me to come to school, ‘we all miss you’ and my friends even rung me and they were like ‘come to school’ and so I decided to come back”).

Many pupils also described how living in poor and deprived **local areas** impacted negatively on their everyday lives and acted as a barrier to their engagement with education. Their descriptions of the local area predominantly focussed on the dangers and risks posed by crime and drugs.

For example, Yasser explained that life chances are only partially to do with ability – the rest is “how you’re brought up and in what environment”:

“...the place I was brought up because there’s a lot of like crime going on there, like in the estates and stuff like that, but children who live a bit North of London like [name] they don’t have estates there, they have like pleasant neighbourhoods, and they’ve got like the three grammar schools and stuff like that”.

Dan, for example, described his local area in East London as a “tip”, saying it is:

“not good anymore ...Everything gets broken too many killings around that area so I want to move out [...] Too many like fights and druggies around that area and stuff like that. Too many like Police driving around now, it is like not safe anymore”.

Over in West London, Tim similarly did not like his area because there is “too much trouble”:

“Round my bit there is a pit behind my house, its just dead land and no one goes there, [...] But people they will nick cars just for the fun of it, drive it about and then when they are

bored of it they will just blow it up in the pit. Just graffiti and all that and they are just so loud and that”.

David similarly described West London as “some areas are quite quiet and peaceful, other areas are quite violent” and recognised that people think it is a “scummy area”.

Analisa complained that her north London borough impacted negatively on her life chances, saying “if you keep growing up in Fairwick you are going to grow up with, like, not a good [chance]”. A few pupils had had the opportunity to see or visit other places, which they often used as a yardstick against their own experiences. For example, Hapsa had been to Bristol which - compared to her own area in London- had shocked her by the “nice people there”. She recounted, “all the people there smile” and it was “clean and it was tidy and quiet”. On visiting his father in Scotland, Steven also noted:

“Well up in Scotland it’s like peaceful up there and there ain’t much, like, bother because where I live as I’ve got a big family down here it’s too noisy and where my father lives it’s nice and quiet, so it’ll help me with all my studying and everything.”

He contrasted Scotland with where he lives in London, which he described as “horrible” with “dead cockroaches and rats and that”.

Similarly to the young men in Archer & Yamashita (2003), the young people in this study also expressed a resignation about their local areas and the fact that they are “used to” “rough” areas where there are ‘tramps everywhere and drugs’. Indeed, as Mark at Littleton put it: “It is normal because, like, I grew up with it”. As Diane Reay (2004) notes, working class areas and particular schools can come to be seen as pathologised spaces that are associated with images of expelled waste (e.g. as ‘rubbish’, ‘crap’), which pupils and local communities have to contend with and somehow reconcile.

Many educational staff (particularly those in Littleton, Hillside Park, Riverway and Eastleigh Central) positioned themselves and their schools as engaged in a constant battle against the draw of the street and drug/crime cultures and the poverty of depressed and often socially isolated local communities – encapsulated in the notion of ‘the spectre of the estate’. This was felt particularly in the three schools that served highly localised catchment areas (Hillside Park, Riverway and Eastleigh central), compared to the schools that served a wider catchment area (Cowick and Blackwell).

“...the pull of the street is also a genuine pull around here” (Deputy Head).

“I think this is quite a needy area, you know and there are issues of poverty and free school meals, I don’t quite know what the percentage is but I think it’s relatively high...But I mean yeah you are tending to kind of battle against street culture, if that's the correct way of putting it, you know that's how you feel at the time when you receive classes, that you’re trying to get them to put away the street culture.” (Head of Year 10).

“I think we do live in a community which is very broken in many ways [...] I think quite a lot of our parents although they are very streetwise they are quite genuinely fearful for what their children can get up to around here. They know that there is a lot of drugs around here, they know that there is a lot of drink around here and I think there is an element of, I think parents would support us and would genuinely like to but I think that they also don’t want to get into conflict with their children and of course kids being kids, well like all of us did, will try and look for an easy way out of things” (Deputy Head).

The problems of poverty on ‘the estate’ were not issues ‘out there’ but were brought into schools with the young people:

“Yeah, but all this comes from what is going on out in the streets and they just bring it back here...You can’t separate it, because all the majority of kids come are from the [name] Estate and the majority of them live there and everything that goes on there comes back in here” (Learning Mentor)

“I think that what goes on in the estate itself and because of it just - if you go and look it’s just miserable - I think that has a big effect on these kids coming to school because living where they do it’s not nice. What goes on there, drug dealings, to people fighting, to the crack situation, it does have a major effect because a lot of my kids live on an estate. All my kids that I work with live on estates. I don’t have one child that lives in a house” (Learning mentor).

A number of staff felt that cultures of poverty impacted negatively on children because they generated social and behavioural issues and were not conducive to an ethos of working hard at school.

“I would describe it as quite a battle to keep re-emphasising you know that they have to work hard, they have to be organised and I think that's probably the case in all the Year groups, but you know there are able pupils and I think some of them are quite lazy, I don’t think the ethos of working really hard is completely established amongst you know all the bright kids, I mean we have bright kids who have behavioural problems and we have bright kids who have social problems, we have bright kids who truant a lot, so there are all those other issues of why kids who are on benchmarks pretty able but don’t succeed” (Head of Year 10).

One Connexions advisor also described the negative impact of poverty and locale (particularly drink and drugs) on parents and families:

“... if I look at the kids I am working with now, lots of that would be because of their parents drug or alcohol use. The parents haven’t got up, their parents are suffering from depression, mental health, so they haven’t been functioning as, I hate saying, ‘normal’ family. But you

know, they haven't had the parental support and the parents often have a really negative view of education and schooling and don't see the worth of it. I've actually spent time in the café with a mum who's trying to cash a stolen cheque, while I'm eating with her and her daughter, and she actually like, do you want this cheque? And she's trying to do it while I'm there. So she's not worried about her daughter's education. She was really upset that I stopped her daughter working 4 days a week, right, *at 14*, in a burger place in Chipton, because she was bringing money in the house and she has a £200 a day drug habit, the mum. So as far as she's concerned, I'm stopping money coming in the house whereas I'm trying to make her realise that her daughter needs her education so she can not be selling her body or doing this or that or when she's 16, 17".

Hence living in poorer areas exposed, and made pupils vulnerable, to high levels of risk in their lives, and could also impact negatively on their self-esteem and perceived life chances.

## **4.2 Gender Identities and Inequalities**

### **4.2i Masculinities**

The issues around boys' underachievement were often described as a more pressing issue for schools than girls and disaffection (although not exclusively, see next section): as one Assistant Head Teacher at Blackwell Street put it, "boys is our main issue in terms of behaviour and attitude to work". Issues around masculinity and disengagement from education were also regarded as frequently inseparable from 'race' and ethnicity- and the potential causes or solutions were also felt to vary between different groups of boys. White boys were particularly likely to be identified as causes for concern:

"White boys are not achieving as they should be achieving, according to data...the reasons could be the isolation, the lack of role models in the area. The lack of vision in terms of what they see for them and also familiarly a lot of I mean a lot of their parents are unemployed so it's only mugs who work, its only mugs who study to go to university, and also the idea that a low expectations of themselves. Strangely a contradiction to the whole national trend. We find our Afro-Caribbean boys are much more motivated, much more vision but it must be said that it's very few, they make up a tiny percentage..." (Head of Year 11, Riverway).

Some groups of boys were also identified as more problematic than others in terms of their rates of post-16 progression:

"And most of them [Bengali girls] would go up to sixth form and do further post 16. Whereas there is quite a dearth of our boys going into further training, post 16 education." (Head of Year 11, Riverway).

In line with the educational and media concerns with 'laddish' masculinity (see Francis 1999), the boys themselves suggested that their engagement with education was

compromised by their investment in, and performances of, popular 'laddish' masculinities. These laddish identities were characterised by notions of 'hardness' and, as detailed further below, involved various 'anti' educational behaviours, such as being confrontational with teachers (being loud, "mouthy" and "back chatty"). Boys also portrayed themselves as inherently active and unable to sit still in class ("racing around and shouting and stuff"). They said that they preferred to be outside playing sports, rather than sat in a classroom. Getting into trouble and engaging in violence and criminal activities (e.g. doing drugs, drinking, stealing cars) were also positioned as common male activities or rites of passage that mitigated against educational engagement. The boys also constructed 'hard' masculine identities through notions of hyper-heterosexuality, in which girls were positioned as sexual conquests). As most boys also agreed, it was important to project the right image to "look hard". This involved overtly stating a dislike for school, showing off and acting confident in their academic abilities. This latter aspect often meant that boys did not seek help when they had difficulty understanding in class and would lead them to not adequately study or revise for examinations.

Like the boys, staff were aware of the 'anti-education' ethos of popular masculinities – termed the "anti-boffin culture" by one Deputy Head.

"I think it is generally fair to say that the girls in the school behave better than the boys. I think there is less pressure on girls to be macho and behave badly. I think the sort of job culture or whatever the paper defines it as is quite evident here. Boys are very keen not to be boffin or not to be seen as being hard working. If they are they don't want it to be publicly acknowledged." (Teacher in an Inclusion Unit).

"... there is quite a dearth of our boys going into further training, post 16 education." (Head of Year 11).

Some teachers felt that boys are less likely to produce coursework and were less likely to find education interesting. Some voiced a discourse, which Epstein et al (1998) term 'boys will be boys', to explain this disengagement- although as Epstein et al argue, this explanation effectively reinforces the legitimacy of this disengagement:

"I think it's a teenage boy thing. I think we need to make lessons interesting, we need to stimulate them. They learn differently from girls, we need to identify that." (Teacher).

Being 'tough' was an important facet of these popular/ 'laddish' masculinities. As Tyson put it, "like, boys will act rough on the streets and muck about, climb on roofs blah, blah, blah.

Girls wouldn't do that sort of thing, like they act like mature. Like want to be older". Verona also admitted that there is considerable peer pressure to misbehave in class "when you are with your mates you feel like you want to get cocky".

Toughness could be demonstrated through challenges to teachers' authority and frequently resulted in the boys being excluded or removed from class. Hence Lee and Roger both described themselves as "mouthy" and "back chatty and stuff like that". Verona described being regularly sent to the school inclusion centre for "taking the mick" out of teachers and for swearing at them. Peter described his "attitude problem", admitting that he "gets angry quick". Some boys also extended their challenging behaviour to their peers and others, for example Dan said that he and his friends often mess around annoying people ("Just say stuff to them and just torment them, wind them up and then run and they will chase you"). Dan also described how "in Maths the teacher started saying stuff to me and getting on my nerves and I just switched and threw my chair on to the floor and tipped over the tables and walked out".

A key part of the projection of hard masculine identities involved the projection of an anti-education image. In particular, a hard masculine image was associated with hiding - or not showing - any interest in education. As David (at Hillside Park) said, "Well if they [boys] say they don't like school then it makes them look like they're tough". He continued to explain that many boys in his year would deny that they are interested in progressing into post-16 education and will say that they are not going on to college even though "they probably will - they're probably just *saying* that they won't".

Hard identities were also linked to displays of (over)confidence in relation to boys' educational achievements. Jason (who attended Littleton) said

"Some people are a bit too confident in themselves yeah, in the school, thinking that they'd got the best grades in the world like, they didn't really. They got nothing really...I think it brought down their self-esteem quite a lot. Coz obviously before we got our results everyone was talking about 'oh I did this, I did that', but when we got our results back and that, it turned out that everyone who was talking didn't really do so well.'

In this respect, boys may be preventing themselves from seeking help at school, which can further hinder their learning and progress.

Quite a number of the boys admitted to engaging in criminal behaviours as part of their displays of toughness. James' grandmother described how "in Year 8 he changed and started to bunk school and that, to nick motorbikes with his mates". Roger has a criminal record and is banned from entering a particular London Borough. Numerous young people knew, and expressed an interest or admiration in, others who were engaged in criminal activities (e.g. Tim included a photograph in his diary of a friend who was going to prison for armed robbery; another boy took his pseudonym from his brother's name, whom he looked up to for being a "gangster" and who was currently in prison). Dan also described his own engagement in violent and criminal behaviour: "I got stabbed in my leg, on my shin twice by some girl, so I stabbed her twice and I get the blame for it".

Various young people (including girls- see next section) were involved in drug use or dealing drugs. For several of the boys, smoking (cigarettes and marijuana) formed a significant aspect of their life and their identity (and was even described as a "hobby"). For Babu in particular, drug taking and dealing underlay a significant proportion of his disengagement, although he also talked candidly about his desire to give up. Various boys described getting into trouble for smoking at school. Various young people (like Babu at Riverway and Germaine at Blackwell Street School) were identified by members of staff as drug users and/or dealers and these staff were often engaged in trying to encourage the boys to stay on into 6<sup>th</sup> form so that they would not drift away from education and into full-time drug use. Only Mark at Hillside Park talked about being able to resist the peer pressure to smoke cannabis:

"Like all of my mates they can't make their own choices. Like if I am out with them and they say like 'we're going to smoke some skunk' or something I just say 'no', I don't think it is that hard to say 'no'. But they must think it is so hard just to say 'no I don't want some'. They don't make their own choices they would rather just follow and look cool. I would just rather say 'no' and if they say 'go on have some,' I just say 'no'. I don't think it is that hard to say 'no I don't want it'. But that is what they are like".

Although as Mark also added "everyone drinks don't they?" and described how people "go down the field [and] get hammered".

As will be discussed further in Section 4.6 (on the lure of 'bling bling' and branded identities), the young men's investment in 'hard' popular masculinities were also linked to their desire for particular popular urban consumer identities.

In line with Frosh et al (2002), a love of sports formed a cornerstone to many boys' constructions of popular masculinity. Many boys played a lot of sports in their free time- and sports also featured in several of the boys' aspirations (see Section 6 on aspirations). For example, Ben described his interests as "football, fixing cars, riding motorbikes, riding bikes". Dan liked martial arts and Max enjoyed "football, riding [his] pedal bike". James said "I like a lot of sports", listing football, riding bikes, basketball. Mike from Littleton explained how he likes to go scrambling on motorbikes with his friends and Nick's hobbies were "quad biking, paint balling, go-karting". Lee spent a lot of his time playing rugby with a local club (almost every evening) and Steven spent his evenings and weekends swimming, playing football and bike riding. Tyson also had a very packed schedule of active extra-curricular activities, spending Monday evenings bike riding, Tuesdays and Thursdays boxing, and Wednesdays at the YMCA. The weekend, however he spent 'hanging around' with his friends. Nathan spent his free time BMXing with his mates after school:

"We have built loads of bike jumps because there are two pits and in between them there is a fishing lake and just beside that there is a big place called Sand. Its like a big square thing and we have like built a big runway with loads of jumps and that. We just go over there."

When not playing sports, boys talked about spending a lot of their spare time "just hanging out with mates". This love of active pastimes and being outside on the street meant that few boys spent much time indoors or doing homework or coursework. As Nathan put it, after school "I just go and shower and go out".

"Hanging out" was mainly conducted in parks or on the streets ("sitting on walls") and was defined as "not doing much" – although it was also closely associated with "mucking around" and getting into trouble. As Nathan described "on Fridays I meet up with Tim and all that and we just muck around", and as Tyson explained, "Friday, Saturday, like that's when I muck about with my friends. I just muck about, play fight, and we go rough". Dan said that he wanted to use his photo diary to take photographs of "me and my mates hanging out, being naughty", and various boys hinted that smoking, drinking and various other criminal activities were associated with hanging out.

In line with the projection of 'hard' masculinities, several of the boys chose pseudonyms based on aspects of the image of toughness. For example, Tyson chose his name because he is a big fan of Mike Tyson and loves boxing. He claimed to know everything about the boxer, saying "I can read about him for hours, and I watch his videos all day". When asked

what he thought about Mike Tyson's criminal convictions and behaviour, he replied "I know it's bad, *he's* bad, but I don't know, I just like him". Robert is a film buff and chose his pseudonym from his favourite actor, Robert De Niro, who is associated with various violent films.

#### **4.2ii Femininities**

Whilst staff generally felt that girls do not pose the same level of educational concern as boys, a number of staff did feel that the issues were equally pressing for girls ("The girls that we have are usually pretty horrific actually", teacher in a PRU):

"I can think of a number, a group of able Year 10 girls who are quite disaffected and I can also think of a group of able boys who are quite disaffected, so it's difficult really to say you know which is deemed the best." (Head of Year 10).

The girls who took part in the study constructed a range of feminine identities. Whilst some of the girls performed aspects of what the media has termed 'ladette' (or 'bad girl') femininities, there was no simple dichotomy between girls adopting either pro-education or anti-education (e.g. 'ladette') femininities. Girls constructed their feminine identities in a range of ways, often combining seemingly oppositional subject positions e.g. describing themselves as both 'rude'/'bad' *and* as 'caring'/'nice'. As noted below, there were several key aspects of femininity that impacted either positively or negatively on girls' engagement with education, namely the issue of 'speaking my mind'; appearance, peer cultures, and boyfriends. Girls also differed from boys in that they commonly asserted that they were 'good underneath' and valued education. They also displayed disengagement in slightly different ways in class and – over the course of the project- were much more likely to undergo some sort of 'change' (either engaging or disengaging).

For many of the girls, their conflict with teachers at school was felt to stem from the girls desire to be 'loud' and 'speaking my mind' – and this was particularly so for minority ethnic young women. For example, Analisa (a young Black African woman at Cowick School) and Melissa (a Turkish girl at Eastleigh Central) both described their conflict with teachers in this way:

"Some of my teachers would see me as a right nightmare. All my teachers probably would think I am such a bad child because when they say something that I don't think is right, I will answer back and I will tell them. I will say 'I am not taking that because I don't think that's right [...] when the teachers get on my nerves I just cuss them, insult them and they would

send me to [exclusion area], so most of my life I was just going [to the exclusion area]" (Analisa).

Melissa similarly felt that she came into conflict with the school over the expression of her opinions, particularly when she expressed disagreement with particular teachers or school rules. Jane (white UK, Hillside Park) also asserted

"I've always been quite like really strong minded and like 'you have no authority over me!' kind of thing [...] "I have got loads of opinions but I just have to keep quiet and I just don't like the way she teaches, she is very patronising as well".

Melissa also identified with an active and assertive feminine identity, and described herself as "loud", liking sports (particularly football) and took pride in being "the class clown". In particular she saw her loudness in positive terms and as a (valued) aspect of Turkish femininity.

In line with the girls' constructions of 'assertive' femininities, staff also described some disengaged girls as troublesome and confrontational in class. For example, one young black woman in the study was described as follows:

"This student very much goes up and down. She is not weak academically by any means she is quite strong. She is expecting I think B Cs and Ds for her GCSEs. I have listed her mainly because she can be extremely confrontational. [...]. She demands a lot in class and she can be extremely disruptive to a class and still won't understand that she will have contributed to it. This may be that she sits down in class and will talk out loud the whole time to herself as she is doing her work and will sing. And when she gets approached about it she just flares straightaway. [Q: Is there anything that you can say this is the reason for her behaviour?] None that I have come across."

Aggressive or violent feminine peer cultures were also described as bringing girls into conflict with schools. For example, one Head of Year 11 described how a number of the girls in the study had been involved in fights at school (alongside dealing drugs). Describing one of the girls (Charlene), the HOY explained "her friends are the main influence every time she has been in trouble she has never been the instigator of it she has always been there as the second or the third person".

However, the girls saw their 'naughtiness' as simply resulting from their own desires for independence and assertiveness, which they felt was being wrongly interpreted and victimised by teachers. Indeed, various feminist writers have pointed out that assertiveness in girls may be interpreted differently (more negatively) than the same behaviours in boys. Furthermore, black girls' (like Analisa) conflict with staff appears to follow a similar pattern

to the black girls in Mirza's (1992) study, in which it was noted that white staff are more likely to read the behaviour of black girls in negative ways (e.g. as aggressive rather than assertive).

Girls frequently talked about how their *appearance* brought them into conflict with schools. The majority of girls dressed in stereotypically 'feminine' ways, and often resulted in being told off for not wearing the correct uniform. For example wearing too much jewellery, wearing (branded) items of clothing that were not allowed, or other issues around hair or make-up. However, Melissa also felt that teachers at Eastleigh Central had a negative view of her because of her appearance. Unlike most of the other girls, she always wore trainers and track suits. In some ways Melissa seemed to typify the 'ladette' image (Jackson 2005) – she described dressing as a 'tomboy', liking football and sportswear, getting into trouble for smoking and drinking in school and being repeatedly excluded. She also talked with some pride of her 'savvy' and ability to bunk off school without being detected. However, Melissa also described desperately wanting to be seen as "intelligent", but she felt unable to escape from being labelled by the teachers as 'bad':

"Most of the Teachers have this grudge against me, like she is the ... always keep your eye on her [...] Whatever I am doing they are always looking at me, always trying to see what I am up to and I really hate that. [Int: So you feel labelled?] Yes they always have their eye on me".

She felt that her style and appearance fed into this negative image, and recognised that "first impressions always count and I should make a better impression".

Melissa actually underwent an educational 'transformation' over the course of the project (turning into a "goody goody") which was driven by a change in her appearance. She went from being disengaged and a "proper boy" (wearing tracksuit bottoms and hooded tops) at school to a more educationally engaged girl performing a more glamorous femininity by the third interview. This transformation was driven by female cousins and mum over the summer holidays:

"Yeah, people are like [telling me], you look different. Cos I never used to leave my hair out, I never used to put makeup on nothing like that but now you know, I'm putting make-up on, turning into a girl. But I enjoy it, cos it's kind of fun getting dressed up like when you're going out or something." (Melissa).

Attention has been drawn to the importance of appearance as a form of identity capital to working class women (Skeggs, 1997), and for Melissa her educational reform appeared to be

linked with her embodiment and performance of a more 'gender traditional' femininity. Indeed, we might suggest that dominant discourse associates 'idealised' pupil identity with a middle class, heterosexual form of femininity, against which working class femininities may be judged negatively or positioned as 'wrong'.

The importance of appearance to girls was also mentioned by some staff as impacting negatively on girls' engagement with schooling. This preoccupation with appearance was also linked to heterosexuality, namely trying to look for boys and not just in front of other girls:

"Well, what the girls do, obviously there's people like Beyoncé, they do look up to them. Just looking good to them is looking good. 'Yeah, I want to look good' and, 'yeah, I'm going to have my man by my side' type of thing. But I would say the boys focus more on what's going on but the girls are just looking the part and having the materialistic stuff...They're too busy focussing on looking good and whatever. They spend their time in the toilets because every time, even if I go up there now, they're all doing their make up and their hair, trying to look the part because if they don't look the part, one they will get teased because this culture is you have to look good, you have to wear the right stuff and they focus more on that than they focus on their education...Because of that pressure, if that was lifted they would have more time to do this and that, I feel. It's like the girls, 'why are you late?' 'Because I had to do my hair...for every guy to look at me and whatever.'" (Learning Mentor).

Female *peer relations* were also implicated in girls' accounts of their educational engagement or disengagement. A number of girls, like Analisa, blamed their disengagement on their friendships (in Analisa's case with "all the rude black girls"). In contrast, Nadira at Eastleigh Central (who at the start of the project was newly re-engaging with education), felt that her friends helped her to engage more at school:

"Yeah I think like I'm the worst [in my year] I look at them and I think 'wow, oh my god.' It helps because some of my mates are like really motivated they are like doing really well, they are doing everything they can do like at their best. I look up at them and they help me in a way because I look at them and think if they can do it I can do it too" (Nadira)

As will be noted further below, many girls underwent a change over the course of the project in terms of their engagement with education. For Analisa, her transformation to a more engaged pupil identity was also closely bound up with moving away from her friendship group with the 'rude' girls and deliberately seeking out different friendships with "successful" middle class pupils:

"I have started speaking to more of the middle class kids in our school more, in around year ten, and finding out what their parents did and their big houses and stuff and that kind of made me think, like you know, education is going to get you there so why don't you just learn that and kind of pass?"

For a number of girls, like Jane, Nadira and Analisa, their disengagement with schooling was also mediated by their investment in their boyfriends, which tended to manifest as a form of all-consuming hyper-heterosexuality. Whilst boys talked and joked a lot about girls and girlfriends they tended to do so at a distance and would frequently deny any depth of feelings or impact of these relations on their educational engagement. However, among the girls, relations with boyfriends tended to have a more profound effect on their engagement with schooling.

A few girls had 'secret' boyfriends (e.g. Yesim, Jermina, Analisa). As Jermina explained:

"He is 18 and he has his own house [...] like every 2 weeks I go and see him, on Saturday and I can go there by myself. But I don't tell my mum that- I tell my mum that I am hanging around with my friends, I am going to my friend's house who is a girl because if she knew it was a boy she would kill me."

The reason for her mum's concern centred around her fear that a boyfriend would impact negatively on her daughters' educational engagement:

"She says I am young and I have to wait, and if I rush into anything now it is not going to be good for my education. And so if I focus on a boy mainly, with my education I will have to drop one [grade] down. It is like either the boy or my school, and she is telling me like I should drop the boy and concentrate on my schoolwork. I want to have a high grade and then I can do whatever I want to do. I do all my schoolwork but at the same time... I am not going to like let him affect my schoolwork but still I ain't going to leave him. I have told my mum that already and she is like ok, but she still doesn't like the idea of it."

Indeed, among those girls who did have boyfriends, the relationships seemed to result in a lowering of the girls' aspirations or attainment. For example, over the course of the project, Jane (who had a previous record of above average achievement) noticeably disengaged from her peer group, and started to spend almost all her free time with her older boyfriend. As depicted in her photo diary, her school day revolved around her boyfriend – he came from the other side of town to drive her to school and they left school to go and each lunch in Tesco (where he worked). Her evenings were also spent with him. This relationship also impacted on her aspirations, as in phase 1 she aspired to go to university and had been on an open day but by later phases was no longer 'bothered', preferring to stay in the area and find a job to be near him. Jane also notably changed her aspirations from wanting to become a mechanic (in phase 1) in favour of a more 'feminine' aspiration to something more 'arty' by phase 3.

Nadira (a Bangladeshi girl at Eastleigh Central) also changed her aspirations and engagement over the course of the project. In phase 1 she expressed a confident plan to go to university

and pursue a professional career, but by the middle of the project she felt "... totally stuck, I don't know what to do". She no longer talked of A levels or university and was no longer interested in a career in IT or business. Instead she was considering more stereotypically feminine and working class jobs in child-care or beauty. She no longer framed her aspirations in terms of social mobility or pleasing her family – instead she described her sole motivation as being to marry her boyfriend:

"I don't know why I'm thinking about this at my age but I really, really, really want to get married to my boyfriend and so that is one thing I want to end up with him".

Both Jane's and Nadira's investment in their boyfriends had the effect of lowering their educational aspirations. Reay (2001) emphasises the 'delicate balancing act' (p. 157) in which middle class girls are caught in negotiating between femininity and cleverness, stating that 'femininity has to be struggled over and sexuality sometimes renounced' (p. 157). This conflict between educational success and feminine sexuality appears here also, for these working class girls – although in the examples cited above, the girls invest in their (hetero)sexuality, rather than educational success.

In contrast, Analisa (identified as potentially high achieving) also underwent a change over the course of the project – but she came to the realisation that she would have to leave her boyfriend (who was also heavily into drinking and drugs) if she was to progress educationally:

Int: Can you see yourself staying with him?  
Analisa: I don't know, I don't think I can see a future because in the future... it depends on how my A levels go really because if I go to university I know myself and I think I would not like to hang around with someone that isn't on the same level as me you know. Probably I am going to be quite snobby...

Whilst staff did not explicitly raise the issue of boyfriends, some mention was made of the impact of heterosexuality and femininity on girls' aspirations and engagement. For example, a learning mentor at Eastleigh Central explained:

"I know a student, actually two girls that actually truanted because rumours were going around that she was sleeping around and she didn't want to come to school because she didn't want to face it. And she said if she did come to school she'd end up getting expelled because she's going to end up having a fight".

A few staff also thought that these issues were heightened in some minority ethnic families:

"The proportion that are unlikely to go onto a college course are the girls who will be engaged or who will be married and they just won't progress and that is the cultural difference. It really does a lot of the time come down to the cultural divide...The sort of danger period is really year 10, year 11, at the end of year 10, towards year 11. A couple of years ago one of the girls in my tutor group, I had her all sorted out for college...withdrew from the course because she was engaged and has done nothing since." (Head of Year 11).

Unlike the boys- who were happy to portray themselves as 'hard' or 'bad', the girls were often at pains to point out that despite their conflict with teachers and/or school they were "good underneath":

"If only the teachers could see how I am with my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, then they will know that I am actually a really good person. They think I hate everyone because I made a bad impression, that is what they think. I don't really care what people think, I am who I am" (Melissa).

As will be returned to in Section 5.2 (valuing education), girls also frequently emphasised that they valued education (even if they did not like school) in spite of their often conflictual behaviour.

The girls' accounts also suggested that their disengagement at school often played out differently to boys' - revealing a distinctly feminised form of disengagement and exclusion, which can be harder for schools to recognise and address (see Osler & Vincent, 2003). For example, Melissa described how in class she would make an effort to look like she is doing work whilst really listening to the radio through her mobile phone. This contrasts with the laddish boys in Frosh et al., (2002), and other studies who describe maintaining the public appearance of not working in class whilst conducting work 'under-cover':

"I never used to go to my lessons. I didn't go for six weeks and I used to hate the ...lesson, it was just so boring and I used to sit there and didn't do nothing. I used to listen to the radio on my phone. I held a pen in my hand to pretend I am working and...that is like my little trick". Staff also felt that girls' exclusion could sometimes be obscured because the terms of reference and nature of disengagement can take a different form, or because the issues were particularly acute in some subjects rather than others:

"The boys are very much disengaged, more than girls and the girls tend to stay a bit more focussed, certainly in Year 11, it's the boys that kind of trundle along. The girls you get extremes of, you get the fantastic ones and you get the, you know the truants, but the boys are, they generally trundle through school, and they'll trundle onto a sixth form course." (Deputy Head).

"And by and large the girls are not under achieving so much, as a matter of fact if you look at the profile in science because I'm head of science as well I can tell you that the girls are doing better comparatively with boys in science. But you see, what is to happen is that the cohorts that are actually with the highest grades are the boys...So the route of progression there, you'll find a few girls that I know of who will go into sixth form or stay on and most of them

if they stay on they'll stay on here and do courses like the BTEC courses, not the very academic courses.” (Assistant Head /Key Stage 4 & 5 Co-ordinator).

The difference between confrontational or quiet disengagement was framed by some staff in explicitly racialised terms – with African Caribbean girls seen as more challenging, whereas Asian and Turkish girls were singled out as ‘quieter’:

“I would say that a lot of the African-Caribbean girls and the African girls will challenge you, will have a lot to say about a lot of things. But once they know their place in the classroom the majority of them are very happy to sit down and get on with their work. They just want to know where their boundaries are and they will push to find out what they are at the start. And then once they know that you are going to stick with their boundaries or they know where they stand you know they are perfectly fine. I would say a lot of the Turkish girls appear to be very quiet and appear to be very hard working but when they are put together in groups they will speak their own language in class and sometimes it is quite rude to the rest of the class because obviously nobody can understand what they are saying. And also they will be very happy to sit down for an entire hour and speak in their own language and not do any work at all and they really do need a lot of pushing. Some of them do become a bit rude with you if you do challenge them about the fact that they are not doing what you have asked them to do and they will be quite in your face and things like that. And so they won't push at the start but they will push later on and you have got to keep an eye on them and if they don't sort of follow through then they can be quite rude and abrasive towards you.” (Head of Year 11).

As noted above, many of the girls who were tracked talked about a process of ‘*change*’ over their final two years of compulsory schooling. By the point of the third interview (either entering Year 11 or after they had left and taken their GCSEs), many of the girls were now regretting their previous lack of educational involvement - in contrast to boys who tended not to talk so much of regret. Many girls now talked about wanting to ‘change’ and (re)engage with education, and in particular, many talked about wanting to become a ‘good’ pupil. For example, by the third interview Analisa now described herself very differently:

“Well from year nine to year eleven there's been enormous change like I've changed, my personality and stuff. I'm not rude to the teachers any more.... “Now I'm a good girl and learning and stuff”.

In this respect, girls appeared to engage in more internal regulation than boys, particularly as they approached GCSE examinations. In this sense, they might be seen as embodying more reflexive forms of identity (see Adkins 2002) and surveillance of the self.

### 4.3 Ethnicity and racism

Minority ethnic pupils' identified a variety of ways in which aspects of their cultures and family lives could encourage their motivation and engagement with education. However, they also outlined how coming from a minority ethnic background could be associated with educational disadvantages- particularly in terms of lacking knowledge or understanding about the educational system but particularly in terms of racism.

In line with previous research (e.g. Archer & Francis, forthcoming; Francis & Archer 2005), minority ethnic pupils were more likely to talk about how their motivation and engagement with education were increased by their families engaging in social competition within their communities over their children's educational achievements (ie. employing *social capital*).

As Analisa's extract below indicates:

Int:                   What does your dad expect from you, what would he like you to do?  
Analisa:            Be some big girl getting some money, loads of money and stuff like that and going around and showing off to his friends that his daughter has got this, this and this [...]

Whilst Analisa herself maintains that she is not affected by her father's views (saying "I know he is like that and I don't really care"), over the course of the project her aspirations and views clearly started to converge and reflect her father's more closely, suggesting the subtle and unconscious power of the habitus.

However, as other pupils also pointed out, their families' often lacked knowledge, understanding or information (*cultural capital*) about the educational system, which could sometimes place them at a disadvantage in schooling and could decrease their confidence and engagement with learning. As Hapsa (a refugee at Blackwell Street) explained, she and her mother had no knowledge of the education system when she first came to the school and did not know what subjects to choose or whether she should stay on at school into the sixth form, or go elsewhere

"There was no one help me, but [...] my mum, she doesn't know about anything [...] and there is no one explain to me at first place [...] I don't have a dad, but my mum doesn't know about anything about school or learn".

Nadia similarly reflected on how she had to learn a new set of 'rules of the game' on coming to school in the UK, including differing cultural norms and practices, such as wearing a uniform, standing up when a teacher enters the room and the practice of detention. She felt that she has little knowledge about post 16 routes due to her family's unfamiliarity with the

system (“[my dad] doesn’t know much about college as well [...] I think because I’m from another country”).

Those young people who were refugees or recent migrants also described how their previous experiences of migration had impacted negatively on their education. For example, Hapsa (a refugee from Somalia) did not get the chance to go to school until she arrived at secondary school in the UK. Jermina also revealed that she did not go to school until she came to the UK aged 12. Experiences of displacement made it difficult for the young people to settle down at school straight away. For example, Melissa moved from Turkey when she was 7 but described how she did not really know what was happening when they moved to the UK and that it was ‘scary’ – particularly as she did not know her father, who had spent most of her early life waiting in the UK until the family were able to join him. Jermina, like other refugee young people, continued to feel traumatised by the life events she experienced in her previous country (“when I think of it, my stomach aches”).

Issues of *racism* were raised by pupils from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and their accounts construct a complex picture of racism/s which extends beyond a simple dichotomy of ‘black and white’ issues. Indeed, pupils from white, Asian and black backgrounds all felt that they had experienced ‘racism’ and a number described schools as being ‘biased’ towards pupils from particular backgrounds.

Within the data there were some clear examples of white pupils expressing racist views. For example, Mark (a white English boy who attended Hillside Park School – a predominantly white school) expressed typically racist views in relation to immigration, complaining that he ‘hates this country’ and ‘hates Tony Blair’ because he ‘lets all the Kosovans in’. He denied the prejudice in his views, maintaining

“It’s not racist just because you don’t want poncers coming into the country [...] That’s why I don’t like it here: all of them are just taking over [...] I don’t mind if they are actually working for a living and they are working like just as hard as my mum and dad do then that is fair enough [...] its just the fact that when they come over and they don’t want to pay for nothing and they know that England is an easy ride”.

In line with previous studies that have flagged up the complexity of racism (e.g. Billig et al. 1988), Mark suggested that he did not extend his views to individual refugee pupils at his school, and although he personally knew refugee pupils whom he felt were “alright”, these interpersonal relations did not compromise his views on the wider issue:

“Yeah we have got about 10 in the school. They are alright, they are alright to speak to if you know them. [...] But just to let them in to ponce off you I just think that is sad”.

He also expressed racist and nationalistic views about ‘Englishness’, complaining that he dislikes it when people from minority ethnic backgrounds “claim” to be English. Such views indicate how entrenched racisms can be and how they are not easily amenable to change. Kay (a young white woman) also talked about her satisfaction at moving out of London to the home counties over the course of the project. She said she preferred her new area, which she felt was nicer because “there are less coloured people”.

Minority ethnic pupils also talked about their experiences of tense inter-ethnic relations at school and of their experiences of racism. For example, Charlene (a Black African girl at Cowick) revealed how people made fun of her African accent. Another girl also commented that people at school tend to stereotype all black people as ‘good at sport’.

A number of pupils raised issues of racism in relation to staff and cited this as contributing to their disaffection. However, some of these accusations came from white pupils, who seemed to be reacting against the school’s anti-racist and/or multicultural ethos. For example, Lucy (a White English girl) felt that her school favoured Asian pupils and called it a ‘racist school’ and referred to particular members of staff as a ‘racist’ or ‘bigot’. She felt that this favouritism was directed against both black and white pupils (‘they’re racist towards blacks and whites I think. [...] they’d rather listen to the Asians’). However, Babu (a Bangladeshi boy at the same school), felt the exact opposite, and complained that the school discriminated against Asian pupils, saying “the teachers are racist” (even though the school had many Bangladeshi teachers). Babu had extremely difficult relations with many teachers, some of whom saw him as projecting a ‘gangster’ image (see section 4.6) – although in contrast, Babu expressed feelings of intense powerlessness within the interviews (typically making comment like ‘I don’t tell anyone’, ‘I couldn’t do nothing about it’, ‘there’s no-one you can tell’, and ‘teachers ain’t going to do nothing’). This uneasy combination of factors appeared to contribute to his antagonistic relations with the school. The extracts thus illustrate the difficulty of investigating issues of racism and the contested nature of definitions of racism. The examples also indicate how pupils can actively use a discourse of racism to interpret to challenge and complain about perceived biases and notions of favouritism at school, and to explain their own educational disengagement or disadvantage. Lucy’s comments also suggest

the potential for 'backlash' among white communities within predominantly minority ethnic schools, colleges and areas (see also Archer et al., 2003).

Across the study sample, minority ethnic pupils expressed a clear awareness of racism in society that might hold them back in their future aspirations – and which they felt they would need to battle against. Black girls seemed particularly aware of these issues – for example a group of Year 11 girls described the ethnically segregated nature of FE colleges and discussed the tensions in trying to choose a college where they might 'fit in'. They felt that 'better' colleges would reject or not want them, thinking "you're black, what are you doing at my college?" and that 'they might be like "why are you going to that college? Its full of *you know ...*". Various minority ethnic girls boys felt constrained by wider societal assumptions that black people are only destined for menial positions (e.g. to "sweep floors" or "somebody who, like, cleans toilets something like that"). Institutional racisms were also discussed, such as the boss who "only hires white people". As one black African boy, Kwame, put it:

"... there are some people don't look down on you. As in - my Dad is like, he's a black businessman yeah, and where he's concerned you don't really see a lot of black businessmen in his position and people sometimes are surprised at him. And even his friends turn on him saying "oh why are you still doing this, you're not like capable of doing this" and my Dad's lost friends because of that because my friends think that oh, black people are just supposed to live in the gutter and stuff".

Whilst for some, this recognition acted as a source of motivation to 'prove myself', others expressed a sense of resignation ("no matter where you go there's always going to be people that's going to look down on you no matter what coloured skin [or] race you are"). As one black Year 11 Cowick girl cogently summarised:

"It depends on how strong the person is, if the person has a very strong character then the person would just be like: 'okay, I don't really care'. But if the person is, like, gives in to what everyone says then obviously the person wouldn't have the encouragement to do it."

Many teachers talked in terms of an ethnic hierarchy of attainment and engagement, in which white pupils were at the bottom (particularly white boys), with other minority ethnic groups achieving better and/ or holding higher aspirations:

"The ones in Year 11 that are not continuing, if you wanted me to group them I'd say they were mainly white English." (Head of Year 11).

"... it would probably be white boys who are seen to be underachieving quite often. So those in my mind, it would probably be the most high percentage of white boys are not achieving as they should be achieving, according to the data" (Head of Year 11).

Teachers recognised that their views were only impressionistic from their own experience, but it was felt that minority ethnic families were more likely to value education as a means for achieving social mobility:

"... English second language speaking families would probably be the ones where education is seen as one way of getting out of things, you know the vehicle for attainment, performance, achieving things. Whereas, [...] white boys are not doing as well as they should, or could rather. It's probably the idea that there's been almost [...] there's always a culture of entitlement you know we don't have to work for this, we can get things." (Head of Year 11).

"... I think here, in my experience, from my year groups, it's certainly the white working-class students who are not ambitious, who do not have that possibly background desire to go on to further education and that was certainly the case with my last year group really [...] there were certainly a core of white working class students who were completely switched off by further education. [...] We've always had a high percentage of Chinese students at the school that do very well as do some other Asian students. The Bengali students work very well and have aspirational, more ambition" (Head of Year 10).

Hence, whilst white, Turkish Kurdish and Somalian pupils all tended towards low levels of achievement, it was felt that minority ethnic pupils were still more likely to continue into further education than white pupils:

"From my experience [...] a few tend not to go onto post 16 and mainly actually indigenous white, which is a curious thing because a lot of the Turkish Kurdish kids, Somalian kids, they leave school, they go onto something else, they want to learn, they want to get their competency, they want to get into a field. But you know, white kids tend to go for a job. [...] I don't think they value post 16 education as much maybe, I don't know, I'm not sure." (Assistant Head Teacher).

"In terms of the pupils from the Turkish background for example, Turkish Kurdish background, you find that when most of them do take progression, I mean, there are two stratas here, I'm not talking about the high achievers... You find that the majority of them will go, will stay on to do things like business related courses, which makes sense for them because parents or uncles run business out there in the community, they're learning how to run their own business and things like that, which is good which is why things like the GNVQ business course is doing all right here." (Assistant Head Teacher and Key Stage 4&5 Co-ordinator).

However, some staff also noted that some minority ethnic pupils might be more likely to have attendance issues where their families rely on them for translation and/or where their families liked to make extended trips back to their countries of origin:

"We have attendance issues with some kids and it's usually because they're staying away to translate for mum, they're going with mum with the doctors or dad to the, translation is a big issue for us and we have to really impress on parents the importance of making appointments outside of school times. And the other issue is that if they're going home because it's cheaper to go outside of school holidays they tend to book holidays during term time and that's an issue for us." (Assistant Head Teacher).

Staff from a couple of schools felt that there may be particular cultural barriers to the engagement and progression of Muslim girls, for whom education might not be highly valued due to expectations around leaving education early to get married:

"We have children, many of the Muslim girls don't move on because the expectation is that they will be within the home. I already have one student who's married despite the fact that she is legally not able to be married - she's actually a married woman. I have one student who's already pregnant and will be taking time out although she says she's going back we know the difficulties of going back with a young child." (Head of Year 11).

"I would say a lot of people that don't continue some of them end up you know have had sad family histories and to get them to finish school you know it is an achievement to get them to finish their GCSEs. But the ones that I can think of mostly would be, there are quite a significant number of probably Muslim girls and probably African/Caribbean or African girls I would think would be the majority of people that don't continue on. [...] There is also a number of girls that come here and will be sent back to their country also. You know once they have finished school they maybe sent back to their country of origin and things like that too " (Head of Year 11).

"I may be wrong in saying this but this might be down to cultural reasons. We are a school which is highly populated in terms of Turkish Kurdish people, Somalians and you know, wherein progression to higher education might not be seen as such a priority...for some of those minorities, for the girls, for the girls." (Assistant Head Teacher and Key Stage 4&5 Co-ordinator).

However, some teachers felt that the attitudes and expectations of Muslim girls was changing:

"I think it most definitely is changing, I think, taking Bengali students for example especially female students, a lot of them actually do want to go and I think a fair few of them, one being your case study, would go and if it meant she's willing to take the risks of her family not much like condoning her but completely going against what she wants to do. I think it really is changing, yeah - the fact that you can do it if you want to. It's just the whole westernised - that's how that family see it, that they've been westernised. But in actual fact it's very difficult not to be when you're living in a country that does portray western views everywhere you look" (Head of Year 11).

One teacher also drew on popular notions of a 'traditional- western' divide to suggest that Bangladeshi girls were more likely to be engaged at school because school offered a space for them to 'be an individual':

"I would say that's more so for our Bengali female pupils where there are very tight family constraints so school is a great place to be. Because you can be an individual." (Head of Year 10).

This assumption – that Muslim / Bangladeshi girls tend to be tightly constrained or oppressed at home- has been critiqued by various researchers for narrowly stereotyping the girls' lives

and identities and for pathologising Muslim families (e.g. Ahmad 2004; Brah & Minhas 1986; Shain 2003).

Just as pupils talked about their awareness of racism in wider society that might hinder them finding work, so teachers suggested that they tried to encourage minority ethnic pupils not to be fatalistic about their future chances. Although as the extract below also illustrates- this was felt to be more of an issue for some (black or white) pupils than others (e.g. Asian pupils):

“The other day I had four black students and I said, 'guys you're not going to get far if you continue like this and you don't improve, I'm here to support you whatever' and one of them said, 'who's going to give me a job anyway, the other day a woman looked at me on the bus and just turned away because I'm black.' I said 'no it's not, if you go with that attitude you are not getting a job or you're not going to achieve anything.' I said [Connexions advisor] is black and he's got a job and [name], I said 'she's black.' [... ] The Asians, with the Asian girls, they do so, they're very low key, keep to themselves and they just get in and 'yeah, I want to go to university, whatever.' I think that maybe comes down to parents as well because the Asian mums say 'go to school, keep on going' or whatever. From, I would say White Irish, I'm working with a couple of girls, White Irish, lovely girls, they crack me up, they'll just leave school and work, that's their attitude. 'Mum did it and I'm going to do it.' Oh yeah, 'my mum worked for Marks and Spencer's for four years and now she's a manager.' That's the type of attitude they have and they all want to have quick money as well so they get jobs to buy their trainers and go out. It's more about enjoying themselves than struggling going to university for four years. They say, 'oh Miss that's too long, I'm not going to do that' whereas the Iraqi boys, their attitude is, they're either going to work for dad or self-employed. They're like, 'I'm not going to have an education, why, because I can work for someone or have my own business.' So they're more focussed on working straight after school, earning a bit of money, saving up and opening their own business, becoming self employed." (Learning Mentor).

#### **4.4 EAL**

Eight pupils did not speak English as their first language and these young people often spoke about the difficulties they encountered at school due to language issues. A further six pupils were bi or tri-lingual.

Amanda described finding secondary school difficult because she could not speak English when she first arrived. David similarly experienced problems reading and writing because he did not speak English fluently. Hapsa said that she had most trouble with maths because she did not understand.

'It was like I was in primary school; I couldn't read or do anything [...] I didn't have a clue what they were doing in the classroom and I was sitting there and I couldn't do the work because I couldn't understand it because I couldn't read it and I couldn't speak English either.' (Jermina)

A number of pupils describing finding their lack of English a barrier in particular lessons. For example, David found science and geography very hard and Hapsa and Jermina both agonised over science lessons because they could not understand the language used. Charlene described finding modern foreign languages difficult.

Some pupils, like Charlene (who entered the school in Year 6) also experienced racist bullying on account of their language differences ('I was very quiet [...] Because I had an African accent; people take the piss and stuff'). The fear of this bullying led her to truant from school. Nadia (who entered in Year 9) also described her worry that her lack of English would stop her from finding friends ('I was scared because I didn't know how to proper English and I wouldn't get friends and stuff [...] I had to find friends quickly and learn English. I found it a bit difficult'.)

Whilst all the EAL pupils were provided with additional language support, the extra lessons were also experienced as exhausting. As Jermina put it,

'Because after school I am tired and I just want to go home straight away and I have to go for a special lesson again and it is a bit hard and I don't like them.'

The strain that the pupils felt under was evident. As Jermina continued,

"My teacher said if I put my mind to it I can do it. I *am* putting my mind to it *but I just can't do it*. I don't know, it is really hard. It looks simple but it is not, it is not simple in the exams because the words- I don't know what they mean. That's the problem- because science has all different words I don't understand.'

Hapsa reveals similar issues with teachers not really knowing how to deal with it: "Some of them knows that I can't do it so they give me easy work or some of them just shout..."

It was only really staff at Blackwell Street who commented in any detail on the issues associated with EAL and the type of provision available for such pupils. As noted below, refugee children with little English or experience of schooling were identified as particularly at risk:

"When we have a casual admission who has no English and has never been to school before and that child is at serious risk of leaving here in two terms time with no exam results... What we do is the child is assessed when they come in... What we do is we look at the curriculum, they are given induction, they are given nine hours of induction and as one of their options they're given something called option support, which is an extra three hours a week but quite frankly, for the rest of the timetable they are expected to be in lessons and the teachers are expected to differentiate and provide something for that student to do, whether they can communicate with them or not." (Head of Year 11).

However, Blackwell Street had also developed an innovative scheme in science, whereby particular lessons were taught in Turkish – thus aiding the engagement and comprehension of Turkish speaking pupils.

#### **4.5 Social Class cultures and inequalities**

Pupils were clearly aware of social class inequalities and various young people felt that their chances in education and later life were compromised by ‘being looked down on’ for their working class backgrounds. One group of girls worried that FE colleges might be “snobby” and “like to intimidate people and make you feel that small”) and they were concerned that such colleges might not accept them because they did not come from affluent backgrounds (“just because they’ve got a Porsche and a thing while we’ve got a little, you know, L reg. rusty old ...”).

Many pupils also felt that they were excluded from particular (middle class) professions because of their own less privileged backgrounds. For example, boys in a discussion group at Littleton worried:

“Say you wanted to be a solicitor or something but you turn up in a job with problems and stuff, yeah, they wouldn’t really [want you] even someone who is capable of doing something like that, because you ain’t got enough class, yeah [...] they wouldn’t really want to see you as one of them” (Dylan, Black Caribbean, Year 10 boys group, Littleton).

Max described going for his work experience at a posh London hotel and feeling so uncomfortable there that he and his friend just left immediately.

‘We walked in the door and oh we just turned around and we just laughed our heads off and thinking we ain’t working here [...] It is a posh hotel and I was thinking oh I ain’t working here and I just turned round’

As Reay et al (2001) have noted in relation to working class access to higher education, many of the young people in this study felt uncomfortable and unable to access ‘posh’ or middle class spaces and institutions, which were seen as ‘not for us’.

Whilst perceiving class inequalities to be common in society, the young people also felt that they were highly unfair. As Fred put it,

“Class don’t mean anything to me, it’s just that just because people that have more money it don’t mean that they’re better than the rest of us. Just because people have less money it don’t mean they’re better than anyone else. We’re all the same yea so why can’t we just be treated like the same?” (Fred, White English, Year 10 Boys group, Littleton).

Issues of accent and language were closely linked with notions of social class, particularly in relation to education. For example, a group of girls at Cowick school worried that teachers judged their answers and ability in class differently because they did not express their answers in a style of language that the teacher valued:

“If there’s a class going on and teachers talking or whatever and you’re all answering a question and lets say you’re sitting in a sort of different way to someone else, the teacher could be like ‘yes you’re right, but no, no, you’re not quite there’. She’s sort of like thinking ‘okay well she said the same thing but the way she presented it was different’ and because of that you’re like ‘no, sorry you’re wrong’.” (Year 11 girls, Cowick School).

Consequently these girls felt that in order to access further and higher education (and be educationally successful) they would effectively need to change themselves and the way they talked and presented themselves, to be “many different people in one person”- a strategy that they described as “twisting” or “changing up”. They imagined that these issues would extend into the workplace, and were concerned that people like themselves with “street” accents are less likely to be employed in white collar jobs (“people think ‘sorry, you’re not capable of working in an office’”, compared to more middle class people who “have a wider range of vocabulary”).

Pupils also gave examples of how they felt their interests or cultural reference points were sometimes disparaged or seen as illegitimate within schools. Mark recounted the story of a particular art class in which he had been reprimanded for a piece of art that he had done in a “graffiti style”, which his teacher had sanctioned, but which outraged the head of art:

“I wrote [the text] ‘Roy Lichtenstein’ and I said ‘do you want me to do it block or do you want me to do it, like, how I write in graffiti?’ And she [teacher] said ‘do it in graffiti it will look much better.’ And so I wrote it in graffiti. And then Mr B- came in, the head of art, and he started pointing at me. I was doing it over in black and I thought: ‘oh he is having a go at me for it going through’. And I said: ‘its not going through’ and he said: ‘I’m not talking about that boy’. He starts going: ‘that’s graffiti!’ and I said: ‘no, Miss told me to do it’. I hate it when I’m called ‘boy’, it’s the worst”.

The issue of class and language was also apparent in Jade’s concerns about the type of language the teachers at secondary school use, as compared to primary: “Because the way they used to talk to me [in primary] I didn’t mind that because it made me understand more but now the teachers like to use bigger words and stuff like that”. Jade went on to explain that

she gets on with her learning mentor because she speaks to her using a familiar style of language: “she would talk to me as if she’s my age and stuff - and not big long words and stuff that I couldn’t understand”.

As sociologists of education point out, working class identities are often associated with problematic and difficult relationships to education. Whilst education may be associated with a process of ‘finding yourself’ for the middle classes, the middle class educational environment is more likely to be experienced as a process of ‘losing yourself’ for the working classes (Reay 2001; see also Hey 2003; Mahony & Zmroczek 1997). Indeed, some teachers did seem aware that engaging with school could be traumatic and difficult for some working class parents: “I think there are other parents who are desperately frightened of school and education and so actually find it quite hard to even come in and talk to us” (Teacher).

The notion of working class students jarring against the middle class culture and ethos of the school was recognised by one or two members of staff, like the Head of Year cited below, who describes the struggle of enforcing a “middle class way”:

"I think this is quite a needy area, you know and there are issues of poverty and free school meals, I don't quite know what the percentage is but I think it's relatively high... Yeah and getting all those basics, you know coats off, gum out and that kind of establishing school... is not necessarily what they're going to get at home, I mean they might be in an environment where everyone has to shout, you know to be heard and that's very often what happens in class, you know it's constantly, you're constantly reinforcing the middle class way if you like, you know I mean, put your hand up." (Head of Year 10).

Teachers tended to speak less about social class than they did gender or ‘race’/ethnicity. Where social class was referred to, this was predominantly within the context of white working-class pupils and issues of aspiration, achievement or engagement.

"In my experience, from my year groups, it's certainly the white working class students who are not ambitious, who do not have that possibly background desire to go on to further education." (Head of Year 10).

However, a few Connexions advisors and learning mentors reflected on how differences in social class between (mostly middle class) teachers and (working class) pupils can mean that some teachers do not have a good understanding of the problems and issues faced by young inner city working class people because they have not had the same experiences. As the Connexions advisor below put it:

"Because on the whole, it's middle class people teaching working class people and although, I'm not undermining their compassion, I'm not undermining their understanding of the issues,

but their experiences may be, you know they may have had experiences obviously with alcoholic parents, drug using parents... they've abused drugs and you know, they would have had issues with their sexuality and sex. But they would probably would have [been] [...] in a more supportive environment or at least where they've got a bed over their head and not moving from hostels" (Connexions Advisor).

As a learning mentor agreed, a lack of shared experience and understanding on the part of white, middle class staff can sometimes mean they may not fully understand or relate to the reasons for the young people's behaviour, or they may interpret it in negative ways:

"In this school, yeah, because if you bring, we've got obviously loads of Iraqis, Kurds, Muslims, Hindus, loads of Asians and if you bring, no offence, a white middle class [teacher] from Dorset it's not going to work because: one, the kids are not going to relate to you, two, unless that person's educated regarding the kids' background then [...] they're not going to be able to relate to him. You've got to know what the kids like, you've got to know their lingo and understand what they're saying to you, I mean, the dress sense and everything, it does make a difference... Being aware of what's going on, London life, what's going on in the estates. But if you're say from Dorset, from a nice part, you won't have a clue what these kids go home to. Unless you have a clue of what's going on at home you think, oh that's why he's trying to do that, that's why and you'll approach that child differently." (Learning Mentor).

Teachers from working class backgrounds themselves reflected on how their empathy with pupils and their experiences motivated them to advocate the importance of providing pupils with additional help and encouragement.

#### **4.6 The lure of other identities: “bling bling” culture and branded identities**

For all the young people in the study, their appearance was highly important project, in which they were heavily invested. They valued branded styles and identities (particularly *Nike*) and many (but especially boys) aspired to the expensive and flashy trappings that are stylised within urban/rap music, encapsulated in the notion of “bling bling”<sup>3</sup>. A high value was placed upon particular symbols of style, which were constructed as markers of identity and hence were seen as more than just accessories or external objects/trappings:

Int      What is important in my life? You have family, friends...?  
Barbie   Education

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Bling bling’ is hip-hop slang referring to (the wearing of) diamonds and jewellery as symbols of a wealth, status and success and the achievement of a lavish, expensive lifestyle. Rap outfit the *Cash Money Millionaires* are widely credited with first coining the term, which is thought to derive from an onomatopoeic representation of glistening diamonds.

Int What else?  
Red Like my valuable stuff like for example my clothes  
Int Your clothes  
Red Yeah my trainers and my jewellery  
(Barbie, Irish; Red, mixed Turkish/White, Year 10 girls Cowick).

This valuing of ‘my trainers and my jewellery’ was voiced across boys and girls and across racial/ethnic boundaries. Many respondents, but particularly girls, also visibly put enormous effort into their everyday appearance and took obvious pride in their style and appearance.

This identity ‘work’ constituted a key aspect of many respondents’ leisure activities, with many young people describing their main hobby as shopping (both male and female), and many wanting to work (at least for some period of time) in retail, specifically in clothes shops. For example Jason said “Everyone my age seems to be getting jobs in clothes stores in the West End. That is what I am hoping to do as well”. The production of appearance was also evidenced in the photo diaries.

There was a highly prevalent conflation of sportswear brands, but particularly Nike, with the young people’s identities. Indeed, respondents often positioned the Nike brand as synonymous with their own class identity/location – or as Fred put it, “we’re Nike”.

“That what we, in a way what we wear - like what I just said yeah - you wouldn’t really expect [upper class] people to come out in Nike tracksuits and stuff, we expect them to have that Gucci designer stuff. But people like us they’re just- we’re Nike.”  
(Fred, year 10 boys group, Littleton)

This powerful identity discourse can be understood as a means through which identity is not only performed on the body but etched on the psyche.

It was also possible to trace various ways in which these ‘Nike’ and identities and heavy investment in the production of ‘style’ impacted on, and shaped, the young people’s relationships with education. As outlined below, the young people’s investment in branded identities frequently brought them into conflict over school uniform (see also section 4.2 on femininities) and with peers, as those without the ‘right’ branded clothes and accessories faced ridicule and bullying. These Nike identities also shaped the young people’s aspirations and their views of their potential future options, such as further/ higher education.

Young people suggested that their desire to wear trainers and branded clothes frequently brought them into conflict with their schools over issues of uniform. For example Max and numerous others described how they would often get sent home for wearing trainers. Issues

of clothing and style were also frequently discussed in terms of peer relations, and the safety or danger of either fitting in or standing out.

“... like, erm, let’s say if I don’t wear a designer thing the kids will probably laugh at me saying oh you’re not wearing you know Adidas or Nike or whatever” (Melissa).

- Lee You’re going to get bullied if, say I walked in a pair of High Tec trainers and everyone else in my class had Nike and Adidas ...
- Dan You’d get the Mick taken out of you.
- Lee [if] I only paid like a fiver for my trainers and they’ve all paid like ninety odd quid for theirs.
- Int And so you’d get bullied because you were wearing
- Lee Cheap trainers.
- Int What would they say to you?
- Lacie Hey little tramp.
- Int What was that?
- Lacie I don’t know, they’d call you a tramp.
- Int They’d call you a tramp. What else would they do?
- Lacie Laugh at you.
- Lacie Bully you.
- Int Are shoes an important thing in school as well then?
- Dan Yes.
- Lee Everything

As the above extract illustrates, branded clothing was bound up with social class, peer status and ‘acceptable’ masculinities and femininities. For these pupils, peer ridicule was feared far more than coming into conflict with the school over issues of uniform.

A clear majority of the pupils interviewed expressed their aspirations in instrumental terms, as mainly to earn enough money to participate in ‘designer’ lifestyles and to be able to ‘buy stuff’ including clothes, accessories, holidays and ‘a nice house’ (e.g. Dan and James). Or as one discussion group put it, all “people these days want all the designer stuff”. Among boys, the desire to purchase symbols of popular masculinity was epitomised by the desire to buy a nice car (David, James and Nick), or as Peter hoped, “I’m gonna get lots of cars”. Boys in particular cited their aspirations as to be “rich” (e.g. Ben, Max, Peter and Nick).

- Int Is there anything else that you think will be happening to you by then will you have a car do you reckon?
- James Yeah probably yeah a nice BM
- Int A nice BM
- James Yeah
- Int What else?
- James Nice clothes and jewellery

The potential link between the performance of branded or “bling bling” identities and crime was reinforced particularly by members of staff, who felt that not only is the culture itself associated with notions of criminality, but that the desire for expensive consumer goods lead young people into crime as a means for funding the lifestyle and image.

"I would say a lot of the kids here, they all want to become a rapper but they don't realise that route, okay you can reach it, but you still need to have something as a back up. A lot of them just focus on that and that's it. As long as he's got [the] image 'I want to be a bad boy' and whatever. I keep on saying just be it but don't act it, I mean, you can be it, look the part but don't act the part type of thing. They just like the whole culture of it, being bad, looking bad, it does come up from the hip hop world I would say...If you listen to hip hop it's all bling bling style, the cars, the money, the women and this and that, that's all materialistic stuff and that's what they are doing. These kids have got more trainers than me. Every week they're getting a hundred and fifty pound pair of trainers and within that culture is the rappers, the MCs." (Learning Mentor).

Describing some of the pupils he engages with, a Connexions Advisor explained how consumer culture and the desire to perform “bling bling” identities can draw young people into crime and away from education:

“They're also quite highly criminalised, their life revolves around the excitement of stealing bikes, cars, where they get their next bit of draw from, getting new trainers, getting new mobile phones, stealing mobile phones, you know things like that. Cool, a lot of them are in cool quite often, and that sort of thing stops them from learning, it distracts”.

Other members of staff expressed similar sentiments:

“There is also an element, I mean I am sure it is something to do with the lifestyle the drugs and you know the sort of dossing round the streets which a lot of their friends might be doing...” (Teacher and Education Programme Manager in the PRU).

“A lot of the black minority, I would say, is more focussed on, because of media I would say, it's easy money, be a rapper, be an MC or just drug dealing because it's just easy, it's quick money, it's easy money” (Learning Mentor).

Certainly, lots of the young men in the study aspired to perform aspects of the “bling bling” masculinity. Babu, for example, talked having lots of money and having several cars, despite being too young to drive legally. Numerous other boys described their ambitions in terms of purchasing the symbols of popular masculinity, such as the nice car (“a nice BM”), and many also wanted to become car mechanics (Babu, for instance, dreamt of working for Ferrari). Cars were associated with the performance of hyper-heterosexual masculinities, as Harry asserted: “If you wanna catch a beautiful girl, what you have to do is modify your car up so it looks all nice and then (inaudible) Its true. Especially if it's a young girl”. Roger described

his hobbies as “music, girls, and cars and motorcycles” and Verona stated that “the three most important things in his life are football, my dad, and girls- in that order”.

The strong desire to be able to earn money to engage in such identity performances also structured some of the choices that young people made about education, such as wanting to leave and find paid employment rather than continue in post-16 education. Various references were also made to the allure of illegal economies for financing a desired lifestyle- which a few of the young people alluded to being actively engaged in, or else which were described as a potential threat on the horizon. Analisa, for example, underlined the importance of finding a job that will pay for designer clothes so as not to be drawn into selling drugs. Among those who did envisage potentially staying on in post-16 education, part time work was regarded as a necessity “to get some money so like I can buy clothes and stuff” (Dan).

As discussed further in Section 6.6, the possibility of participating in higher education was ruled out by most of the young people as unrealistic and undesirable. This resistance was grounded within classed identities, and a strong feeling that ‘people like us’ don’t go to university - university was seen as for ‘posher’ and ‘cleverer’ people (see also Archer et al 2003). An instrumental orientation and preference for earning money in order to purchase consumer goods were also cited as reasons for not wanting to go to university. For example, Max did not see himself going to university because he did not want to get ‘a student loan’ and would rather go work so ‘I’m doing something so’s I can get money’. For Jordan (a white working class girl at Blackwell Street), the prospect of university did not fit with her sense of identity and in particular, her performance of a desirable ‘Nike’ femininity:

Jordan: ... I don’t see that [university] as a path for me.  
Int: Why?  
Jordan: Living on them grants. I like to have new Nike trainers and Nike tops and a new chain every month so I don’t think the grant would suit me.

Jordan’s extract positions HE as an unthinkable lifestyle option that would not “suit” her. Her resistance also resonates with previous work (e.g. Archer et al 2003) in which some non-participants described how they are put off higher education by unstylish images of (middle class) students. Jordan’s comments hint at the dominance of middle class institutional habituses within higher education, against which working class students appear not to fit. Hence HE is not regarded as offering the chance for working class/Nike people to ‘feel myself’ (see also Reay et al. 2001).

## **4.1 ‘Critical moments’ prompting engagement (social and cultural factors)**

As noted previously in this chapter, young people were more susceptible to disengagement and non-progression due to a whole raft of interlocking social and cultural factors. This section will now details how, for some young people, social or cultural factors and critical moments brought about a positive change and increased their engagement with education or helped to raise their aspirations.

### **Escaping negative peer influence**

Over the course of the study, a number of the young people identified an important turning point in their educational careers as being the moment when they began to escape from the previous negative influences of a particular peer group.

Analisa, Dan, Mark (at Littleton), Nadia and Yesim all described coming to a realisation that their friends were a bad influence and making a conscious decision to change or move away from the peer group.

“I think its just people, it’s in the people you hang around with [...] its just that some people are focused on education as well. When my friends won’t, sort of, really focus on education [...] I don’t think teachers can really do much else for you to change, I think it all depends on who you are. If you realise things at an early stage and then what you want to do in life and think am I going to just hang around people and fuck up my life or am I going to concentrate and be a good person in the future. It all depends.” (Analisa).

For other pupils, the impetus to move away from their old peer group was provided by their families. For example, Nadia explained that the move away from her “bad friends” who “didn’t care about school” came from a conversation she had with her father who warned her that she would regret it in the future. She now claimed “I don’t sit next to them in my lessons because I don’t want to sit and chat”.

Natalie’s parents actually sent her to Scotland to live with her dad to help to get her away from negative peer influences and make “a fresh start”.

Similarly, Yesim set out deliberately to make new friends at school after she realised that her behaviour was really upsetting her mum:

“Because she spoke to me [...] she started seeing me bunking and getting into trouble, she knew I wasn’t that type of girl. She thought my friends were making me do that -but its what you want to do as well. And then one day she cried so I thought really sorry for her, then I promised her, I said I want to be better. Last time she came to my parents evening she said there was a big change and she said well done to me and things like that [...] and I said to myself ‘let me move away from them’ because it was too much trouble, gave me too much headaches” (Yesim).

For Jermina and Mark (at Littleton), external events prompted the change- notably when their peers left the school:

“... I used to follow these friends, like my friends, well they left school now, so I’m just like [with] the good ones. Cos I used to hang around with the bad ones, like when they are doing something I just followed them and they all do it together” (Jermina).

“I have stopped hanging around with the my mates that I used to hang around with [because] a couple of them got thrown out of this school ...They would take drugs [and...] just go up to [people] and start trouble”. (Mark, Littleton).

### **Family member or friend gives advice/ encouragement**

A number of pupils found that a particular impetus for change and re-engagement came from a family member (but particularly a sibling) giving them advice or encouragement. For example, the two Marks (at Littleton and Hillside Park), Jason and Lacie all described how a brother or sister had encouraged them to stay on in education. Kemisha, Yesim and Tyson also changed their aspirations as the result of a family encouraging them to aim for more.

“Because, like, when my brother was in this school he done the same and he come out with nothing, so he’s pressuring me to do good, so I just am [...] I talked to it, about my brother, about plumbing and that, and he said that if you’re going to do it, you, you’ll need to go to college and make sure you’re learning and don’t mess the teachers around, cos you know what you want, so get on with it.” (Mark, Littleton).

“Like my brother he has just started to try and get a trade like carpentry, he’s 21. He said “as soon as you get out of school you know what you want to do just get in college. Don’t think ‘oh yeah get a job get some money’ just make sure you get into college” he says. And so I said alright then [...] He lazed around for a year and then he got a job. But he said to me “don’t get a job because you think you are getting a lot of money at first and then later on in you career you will see how much more other people get than you because they have been to college. Even though they have started later than you they will probably end up better off.” (Mark, Hillside Park).

Tyson was inspired to aim higher by both his sister and brother:

“I was going to do an apprenticeship but my older sister said I shouldn’t do it because I’m a bit more intelligent to do one of them. ... my sister said that I should go [to university], cos no

one in my family's ever been ... I thought about it, and after I finish college, I'll just see what happens from there. [my brother] he never got good GCSEs when he come to this school [...] he don't want me to like turn out like he did."

Similarly, Kemisha described wanting to be a hairdresser in her first interview, but by the time of the second interview felt "I think I can do better". Her change of mind was brought about by "people talking to me, my Mum's friends and family", who encouraged her to aim higher. Lacie was also helped and encouraged by her family and friends, which provided her with ideas and information about a wider range of options:

"... there is this course and after the course they erm give you the, either you can go and work on a cruise all round the world or shops, stuff like that [...] my older brother and his mate's girlfriend and his mate used to go to it and they've just got all the information, and they know people in there [...] I spoke to my dad but he has told me that my brother's mates know people in there and gave my dad information about it"

The young people's aspirations and the effects of gender and social class upon these are discussed more fully in Section 6.

For other pupils, their decision to make a change in their lives came from witnessing first hand the experiences of other family members trying to find work. For instance, Darren only decided to stay on in education when he saw his older brother struggling to get work:

"Everyone thinks it's really easy, just go outside one day, get a job, start working, then next day you get a promotion. That's simple. [...] What changed my mind is I saw my older brother trying to go to work, took him ages to find a job, then when he did, it wasn't all that- a very good job, so he tried leaving it and get higher, but he couldn't do it and he had to wait and wait, so he just had to leave that company and go and find a new place and he's back in the same position as he was in the first place".

Melissa underwent a transformation over the course of the project, from being a "tomboy" who was very disengaged with schooling, to a more feminine girl who was engaged at college. This transformation seemed to have been prompted by two events, both of which stemmed from her family members. The first 'critical moment' occurred when Melissa went missing from home on one occasion while she was still at school. However, her family's reaction made her seriously re-think her behaviour:

"My brother phoned, 'come home, come home, Mum is worried and stuff'. And when my brother put my Mum on the phone she was all crying and I felt so bad I cried as well, and my brother was crying as well and he is like 24, and he was crying because my Mum was crying".

Throughout her interviews and photographic diary, Melissa described a very close-knit family who supported each other both emotionally and otherwise (this included an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins). The second incident occurred over the school summer

holidays between Phases 1 and 2, when Melissa's female relatives took her under their wing and helped her to transform into a more 'feminine' girl. The effect of these two turning points was evident by the third interview, as Melissa described being highly engaged at college.

The importance of home was backed up by various teachers. For example, one Head of Year 11 felt that "When home is involved, students seem to do much better". Similarly, an inclusion unit teacher emphasised: "I think that [family] is important. I think that some of our parents take a very keen interest in education and are very concerned that their children do better than they did ... so I think that that sort of awareness is an important factor". This support was felt to be stronger among minority ethnic families than among the white working class families:

"They might be running grocery stores in [name] but it doesn't stop the fact that they want education for their children, they provide, the support is there. They come to parents evening and support is great, most of them are there..." (Assistant Head Teacher and Key Stage 4 &5 Co-ordinator).

### *Friends*

As noted above, peer groups and friends (and for some girls, boyfriends) were described as impacting negatively on attendance and engagement and could also encourage a lowering of aspirations. In contrast, Babu described how a girl friend had encouraged him to give up smoking marijuana and focus instead on his education: "I feel different [...] Like before I used to smoke a lot and stuff and now I don't do that stuff". This contrasts interestingly with the effect of boyfriends on girls' engagement and aspirations.

## **SECTION 5**

### **THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL FACTORS ON DIS/ENGAGEMENT AND NON/PROGRESSION**

This section considers the role of school and educational factors on pupil's engagement and likelihood of progression. It begins (5.1) with a discussion of pupils' learner identities and views of themselves as pupils, and associated issues of confidence, achievement and potential. 5.2 examines how the discourse of 'valuing education' was differently interpreted by staff, parents and pupils. 5.3 examines pupils' views of school. In 5.4, the curriculum is discussed, with particular reference to pupils' preference for interactive and 'practical' subjects and courses that were perceived to be relevant to their future working lives. Pupils' views on teacher-pupil relations are detailed in 5.5 and pupils' and parents' views on home-school relations are covered in 5.6. Section 5.7 examines pupils' experiences of exclusion and 5.8 draws together critical moments relating to school and educational factors that have prompted engagement among the young people.

#### **5.1 Pupils' learner identities**

The young people varied in the extent to which they saw themselves as 'good' or 'bad' pupils, with the majority either describing themselves as being 'both good and bad', or simply 'bad'. Only five pupils described themselves as being 'good' pupils and three felt they were 'middling'. Interestingly, the young people's learner identities did not simply reflect, or correlate with, their actual levels of achievement. For instance, among those who self-identified as 'good' pupils, their levels of achievement were average for the study sample (although technically below the nationally expected standard for their age, being mostly around the level 4 or 3 mark). For example, Dan (who achieved 3s and 4s at KS3, apart from in English, where he failed to achieve a grade) confidently described himself as:

"Quite clever in some lessons, and intelligent [...] I'm good at designs, I'm good in PE, Tech, Science, English and Maths".

Similarly, James (whose KS3 results spanned 4s and 5s) describes himself as "quite clever" and was confident in his interviews that he would get "good grades" at GCSE. Leah (3s and 4s) and Kemisha (4s) also saw themselves as 'good' pupils, although these self-descriptors

seemed to reflect their self-defined behaviours in class rather than an explicit confidence in their own abilities. Conversely, Amanda felt she was a middling pupil (“I think I am OK, I am not too good, not bad but I’m ok - in the middle” but actually received Us at GCSE).

Looking at pupils’ KS3 scores, it was striking that of those pupils who achieved the highest levels of achievement across the sample (6s and 7s), none actually defined themselves as being ‘good’ pupils. They either described themselves in mixed terms or as ‘in the middle’. These pupils also tended to underachieve at GCSE, compared to their potential. For instance, both Jason (black African, Littleton) and David (white English, Hillside Park) described themselves as intelligent/ able pupils with a good level of ability, but who were prone to not doing homework and to being ‘bad’ in class (or as David put it, being a “pain in the arse” in lessons).

Jason, who had been hoping for Bs in his GCSEs (and had got 6s and 5s at KS3) was disappointed when he got 4 Cs and 3Ds. He seemed to have assumed that his ability would have carried him through, despite a lack of application in doing homework and coursework and playing about in class (“it is not that I don’t do it [homework] but I avoid it. They hand it out at the end of the lesson and when you are leaving - I just don’t grab it”). His dislike of revision also seemed to have played a part (“I don’t know. I’m more of an outgoing person and I don’t like to sit in one place for a long while, so I was always out and about like with friends [...] To sit down for an hour and watch the time go by and do some work that’s kinda difficult”).

David claimed in the interview before his examinations that he was anticipating achieving at least four A-C grades at GCSE (and had achieved a 6 for KS3 maths), but in the end only turned up for one of his GCSE examinations (drama). He maintained afterwards that he was ‘not too bothered’ because he had not been confident about doing well because he had missed a lot of school. Conversely, Jane (who achieved 6s and 7s at KS3), seemed to lack confidence in her abilities and was not sure that she was strong enough to progress further educationally (“I’m not very confident about getting good like A Levels”). Whilst she recognised that she was “in the top set for everything”, she also felt that her abilities varied across subjects (a point not borne out by her KS3 results). In particular, she suggested that because she is “quite an artistic person”, doing well in Photography, Art and Music but not in science and maths:

“There are a few subjects that I’m really not quite good at [...] Like kind of the scientific kind of things like well obviously science and maths, I don’t have to use I don’t really have to use computers but when I do then I’m really bad with computers. I’m arty, I think, so maths and science are really bad for me but I’m still working at C level now in maths and science. I just got to try and keep that up”.

As Jane notes, at the phase two interview she was still around a grade C level in maths and science, but her lack of confidence (and investment) in these subjects appeared to create a self-fulfilling prophesy, as her achievement in science slipped to a grade E at GCSE. As noted elsewhere in the report, Jane’s confidence and engagement was mediated by various other social and cultural factors, although she did stay engaged in her favourite subject of Art, for which she was predicted an A or A\*.

Analisa had been underachieving for several years, despite being recognised previously as having the potential to be an “A student”. Over the course of the project she managed to push her grades up from Ds and Es (phase one), to Bs, Cs, D and E (phase two) and she ended up achieving “mainly Cs” at GCSE, and “screamed the school down” in delight with her C in maths. She reflected:

“I know that I was stupid I could have done better. I could have got a good set of grades if I’d been, because most teachers just say if you’d been like that in Year 10 you would have been an A student, an A/B student. And it’s like why did I do it? [...] If I had started in Year 9 and revised for my SATs and everything I would probably have got As. I know I would have done better much, much better”.

Almost a third of those who responded saw themselves as ‘bad’ pupils, but within this sub sample, a distinction was evident between those who described themselves as bad because of behavioural issues (who recorded mixed levels of achievement) and those who felt they were bad because they lacked ability or aptitude (who tended to record the lowest levels of achievement). Among the former, pupils primarily described their ‘bad’ behaviour as being disruptive in class and coming into conflict with teachers. For girls in particular, this notion of being ‘bad’ was linked to being “loud” and expressing opinions. For instance, Jordan (who achieved 5s and 4s at KS3) described herself as:

“Oh I’m very loud. I’ve quite an attitude problem, I’ve a lot of questions about most of the rules, I don’t understand why most of the rules are necessary and what their advantage is to us[ ...] I’m not a, what’s the word, I’m not a star student [Int: What do you mean by that?] Oh I’ll argue with the tutors if I don’t think they’re right, I won’t just sit there. I’d have to stand up and wave my arms around, no - I don’t think that’s right. Punctuality, I’m getting better at punctuality, but I was always late before”.

Similarly, Latoya described herself as “quite rude” because she always speaks out if someone gets on her nerves and Kyle felt she was a bad pupil because she is often late and “a bit of a rebel”:

“I don’t know, I feel like I am a bit of a rebel [...] because if I look at the way other people see me, I can see it from their point of view”.

These girls’ quotes- but particularly Jordan’s- point to how dominant discourses around the ‘ideal (female) pupil’ may be experienced as narrow and constraining by young working class women, who seem to have difficulty reconciling a positive view of themselves as pupils with their own notions of assertive or strong-minded femininity.

A number of pupils identified themselves as ‘bad’ pupils due to their difficulties with comprehension, and particularly literacy. Most of these pupils were among the lower achieving. For example, John (who achieved level 2 and ungraded at KS3, and was predicted F/G at GCSE) did not expect to get good grades at GCSE and worried that the examinations would be too difficult, although he did better in his mock examinations than he expected.

These pupils recognised how their difficulties and frustration with reading and writing could lead them to get “upset” in class – often manifested through fidgeting, talking and being unable to concentrate. As Peter and Ben explained:

“Its sad I know it’s sad. I’m only 15 and I already tell my cousin like go to school. I wish I went to school. I do wish I went to school and done my work because I know what it is going to be like already but... [Are you trying at all?] I was but I *can’t*. I don’t know what it is, I don’t like school. I hate school [...] Its sad its upsetting that, but I don’t even know, I don’t even care no more [...] They [teachers] would say he is a bright kid, he is funny. Like my English teacher would say that he is good in class but has got an attitude problem that’s it. The rest of my teacher would say he don’t listen, don’t work, he don’t do nothing [...] Every time I used to go to school I always used to get sent, sent home most of the time. Coz, I’m not gonna lie, it’s mainly my fault, it is my fault coz I can’t, can’t put pen to paper. I just find it the most boring thing on the earth. So I just get upset in class, and it carries on from there” (Peter).

“... today, I was reading a question in a test and I was reading it and it was going in my head like round and round and round and round. I just can’t get the answer and then it’s just like ‘oh, lets forget about it’ ...” (Ben).

Mike’s mum suggested that a lot of Mike’s frustration with schooling could be traced to his difficulties understanding the work and with his literacy (“he can’t get on with the reading and writing”). She feels strongly that these issues have not been fully recognised and that he has not been adequately supported to improve.

“Yeah, he should have got more help as well really, because a lot of the frustration with him was because he couldn’t understand what the teacher was telling him to write down from the board. You know, he would say ‘I can’t understand what you’ve written down’ and it would be like, ‘sit down and stop mucking about,’ and it went on from there so he didn’t really get much help at all. We used to go to the Parents Evenings and it would be, ‘he doesn’t listen,’ and it would be, you know - But in my view, he’s partially dyslexic”

Rather, she feels he has been negatively labelled and his problems ignored:

“I think the trouble is once you- when you come up from Year Seven if you’re finding it hard and you haven’t got the right sort of help or the right sort of teachers that will sort of say, alright we’ll sit down and look at it, once you’re labelled as someone who is going to say ‘I can’t do it’ and start shouting, it just carries you through, it stays with you wherever you go.”

Consequently, his mother feels that Mike wants to opt out of school and get a job as quickly as possible. Despite being able to help Mike to get an apprenticeship through friends of the family, Mike’s mum still worries that “the reading and writing is going to come into whatever job he goes into”.

Lacie also described herself as lacking confidence due to literacy issues (“I am not that confident because I can’t really read or write properly so I get all nervous”). She felt particularly self-conscious going for extra learning support and being grouped together with “the not-so-clever”. She suggested that she often ends up not doing work in class because she becomes frustrated and embarrassed:

“I get annoyed because everyone else I think is cleverer or better than me at English and I get frustrated [And what happens when you get frustrated?] I just sit there and don’t do none of my work”.

Lacie’s mum agreed that she lacks confidence and does not enjoy school because of her difficulties in reading and writing:

“She keeps saying ‘I don’t want to go to school, I don’t like this, I don’t like that’ [...] if she’s not confident enough to do something then she obviously- she ain’t going to want to do it, or she’s embarrassed to do something”.

However, unlike some of the boys who have difficulties in reading and writing and who effectively opt out of schooling, Lacie continued to try and aims to stay on at school, in her mum’s words “you know, to better herself”.

As hinted at in Lacie’s extract, a number of pupils displayed a severe lack of confidence in their abilities and held damaged learner identities. For example, Babu (mixture of 3s, 4s and ungraded at KS3) claimed “I ain’t good at nothing” and Lucy (3s and 4s) said “I ain’t going to go nowhere” and described herself as “not happy”. Whilst Babu lacked confidence in his

abilities, he also related his problems to his behaviour (“...because I make trouble in school too much”) on account of engaging in truancy, vandalism, drugs, shouting and swearing. This internalisation of educational failure into an aspect of the self can result in chronic disengagement, in which learning and education are seen as antithetical to a pupil's sense of being.

As noted at the start of this section, the majority of young people described their learning identities in mixed terms. The most common form of this mixture was for young people (but particularly boys) to suggest that they had ability and/or did their work but also were lazy, lacking application or prone to ‘much about’. Nick was typical in describing himself as “I’m good but, work wise, but I talk a lot”. Various other boys also emphasised that whilst they did work, they were also “easy-going, likes a laugh” (Darren) or “a smart boy with a sense of humour” (David).

“Well, I would describe myself as a good student, working hard and just get on with it [but] sometimes when I get bored I start mucking about [...] I don't know I sit down, and like finish my work, and I get too hot and that, and then I just start like mucking about because I get too bored” (Mike, Hillside Park).

Pupils also recognised that teachers were frustrated by pupils’ limiting of their own potential, as Kyle said, “they [teachers] would probably say if I stayed in school that I would be bright” and Max suggested that teachers felt he had got capability but did not try hard enough. Kyle’s perception was borne out by staff at her school, who described her as:

“extremely bright and extremely capable and if she was here every day and she wanted to, she would get As in her GCSEs. However she is not attending and she is not wanting to do the work in some of her subjects”.

As noted in section 5.4, pupils’ mixed engagement with learning often varied according to the type of work or activity in question, with a general preference for ‘practical’ or interactive activities:

“Like I get distracted easily and I don’t like, I like doing hands-on work and not pen and paper” (Mark).

“I am good at answering questions but I am not good on paper. When it comes to discussions I am good in that but when it comes to writing things down and everything I am just not that good” (Sarah).

Some girls also explained that their ‘mixed’ learner identities reflect their attempts to ‘change’ from being a ‘bad’ pupil into a ‘good’ pupil:

“This year I’ve set myself a target, that I want to be good and all, like I want to get good things, good results in my GCSEs this year and like, I’m really trying this year to be good and not to do like what I used to do in Year 7, 8 or 9” (Jermina).

“And now I am regretting it because I am so behind in coursework but like I know how I am going to catch up and I want to catch up on stuff” (Nadira).

But these attempts at change were not without difficulty, and although Nadira was working hard to catch up with her work - and was identified as potentially able to aim for Cs and Ds - she seemed to feel defeated by the task in hand (her current level was noted as E/ F), saying in her last interview:

“Yeah, I think it’s so useless for me now cos I haven’t done none of the course work, I’ve done, like, one and you need like minimum two [pieces] to like get entered for the GCSE and time’s running out”.

Staff agreed that many pupils were effectively resigned to failure:

"Nowadays there’s no self esteem, [they say] 'I wouldn’t want to go' and 'oh I’m not going to pass anyway'. You automatically have that attitude." (Learning Mentor).

Teachers also highlighted how pupils can face barriers to achievement because they do not know how to be independent learners and lack both the skills and confidence to engage in the necessary hard work:

"They don’t always know how- their study skills are often very low and I think that the ability to work independently and the ability to, actually to work particularly hard at all are things that we inherit" (Deputy Head, Hillside Park School).

These issues are illustrated in the case of Lee, a white working class boy at Riverway School who was tracked over Years 10 and 11. He describes himself as “loud”, “funny” and as someone who always puts his hand up to answer questions in class. However, he does not have a very positive view of himself as a learner and in many respects seems resigned to failure. He divides pupils into ‘good’ (those who enjoy schoolwork and who will/ deserve to progress into post-16 education) and ‘bad’ – aligning himself with the latter due to his lack of enjoyment of school work and his assumption that he will not progress. He also linked a dislike of school to a local identity, to justify that disaffection from school/learning is ‘normal’ for people like himself (“people hate school in this area”). His mum worries about his resignation to failure “he has got the attitude ‘if I fail, I fail’ and he has got the wrong attitude”). Although she takes solace in the fact that this attitude means “he will not stress, he will not make himself ill ... I would rather he was the way he is than being ill and stressing over his exams and that”.

Lee has special needs and this frames the way in which he and his family view his achievement and progress. In the first interview Lee was particularly happy with his level of achievement because, despite having special needs, he managed to get “all 4s” in his KS3 tests when he was predicted “all 3s”. His mother also emphasises that simply being entered for GCSEs marks significant improvement in itself and reflects the good work of the school in supporting him:

"As I said, he couldn't read or write, he writing was well like baby squiggle when he come out of primary, but coming here... And I am proud of what the school has done to him because if you had said to me 5 years ago would he sit GCSEs, I would have said no”.

However, Lee started to disengage more over time as lessons involved less practical work and placed more emphasis on writing and getting the curriculum covered. In his second interview he becomes more adamant that “I think school is crap” and by his third interview he talks about trying to get sent out of lessons so that he does not have to do the work. However, he also imagines that he will apply himself later in the year for his GCSEs (“when we go on study leave, I will study”) and suggests that whilst he “don’t care really” about the mock examinations, these might influence his confidence with regard to his forthcoming GCSEs at the end of the year (“If I do good in these I reckon I’ll be a lot more confident going in for my GCSEs”). In this respect, Lee appeared to be hindering his chances of success yet further, by not leaving adequate time to catch up and by setting his future confidence on mock examinations that he has not put any effort into. Such self-hindering strategies may reflect pupils’ psychic responses to the fear of failure.

## **5.2 Cultural discourses around valuing education**

Staff commonly suggested that a key reason underpinning the disengagement of pupils (but particularly white, working class pupils) is that they and/or their families do not value education very highly.

“I think I have to go on what I see - and what I see is that a quite significant percentage of our school population come to school without a bag. And if, to be frank, the level of value the family put on education is such that they are not even interested in whether their son or daughter takes a bag to school with a pen or a pencil in it, then I wonder whether sometimes the value that parents tell you that they [have] when they are having a go at us after school is actually genuine” (Deputy Head).

The perceived lack of value that was placed on education in some families was felt to feed into low rates of progression into post-compulsory education along with truancy/ non-attendance:

“I think if they don't continue it is because there is no value placed, they don't value education in the same way that some others might value education”, (Head of year 10).

“I think her family doesn't really push her to come to school” (Head of Year 11).

Predominantly, familial lack of valuing of education was felt to stem from the negative educational biographies and experiences of parents - who did not value education for their children because they themselves had bad experiences of schooling. However, a few staff also felt that for some parents, a previous lack of attainment actually provided them with a source of motivation for their children- who they hoped would ‘do better’:

“I mean you do, of course you get some parents, [who say] ‘I don't want them turning out like I did, Mr [name]’, ‘I wasted my time at school, I don't want the same thing to happen to my son or my daughter’. There is quite a lot of that but I have had that everywhere I have ever worked” (Deputy Head).

As noted previously in section 4.3 on race and ethnicity, staff perceived ethnic differences between families in terms of their attitudes towards education. Whilst – on the whole- minority ethnic families were felt to value education more than white working class families:

But there were exceptions. In particular, some staff suggested that education was not valued as much for Muslim girls – as one learning mentor suggested:

“Well [they say] ‘my mum never went to school,’ is the attitude I get. There's no enthusiasm at home to make something of yourself and there's no motivation at home. I feel it has to come from the mother or from the father or the carer, whoever it is at home, but they're not getting that. They get it from me basically.”

Interestingly, however, *all* the young people who took part in the study claimed that they did value education and said they recognised the importance of getting good qualifications in order to ‘get on’ in life - although many pupils also felt that they would be unlikely to achieve good results. Almost all pupils maintained, however, that whilst they valued education, they disliked school (see section 5.3 for views on school). Moreover, pupils made a distinction between compulsory and post-compulsory education, in which the former was valued and

regarded as important to later life, whereas the latter was resisted and seen as of lesser importance or use (particularly higher education, see 6.6).

### 5.3 Views on school

For pupils, the most popular aspect of school was commonly named as the social side, namely the opportunity to see other pupils and friends. This social aspect was clearly and consistently depicted in the young people's photographic diaries, as well as being reiterated across the interviews. Even those pupils who said they strongly disliked the curriculum and teaching and learning aspects of school, enjoyed seeing their friends at school. For instance, whilst Tim was clearly disengaged from learning, the school still constituted an important and central part of his life. This is also emphasised through many of the young people's reflections in phase 3, on returning to school after the summer holidays:

Int:                So how did you feel about coming back to school?  
Kemisha        Not happy... I was a bit happy  
Int:                What were you happy about?  
Kemisha        To see friends  
Int:                What were you not looking forward to?  
Kemisha        Lots of coursework

The value and enjoyment attached to this social side of school was sometimes able to compensate for the aspects of school that were not enjoyed. For example, Jermina (at Blackwell Street) said "Sometimes I hate school because of the lessons but then after, I don't know" and she explained that seeing her friends in lessons enabled her to feel better and re-engage with schooling.

Some pupils were also generally positive about liking their school. For example, Yesim (Cowick) suggested "I got used to this school, I really like this school- the education, the teachers, some of the rules, I think it is quite nice".

The issue of school 'reputation' also seemed to shape how some people felt about their school. Pupils at Hillside Park and Littleton were particularly likely to express positive views of their school. These schools were oversubscribed and in some respects, the pupils' positive views might reflect wider community discourses in which the school is recognised as being a 'good school with good teachers':

“I think the school’s very good and all the teachers in the school are good and polite and I like this school very much and the education that they give you is very good”. (Ben, Hillside Park)

“It’s good [Int: What do you mean by that?] [chuckles] I don’t know, it’s just a good school, good teachers” (David, Hillside Park).

“Good school and good, all good lessons. And I’m getting on well since I come to this school” (Mike, Hillside Park).

Jane also explained how her parents specifically chose to send her to Hillside Park, because it was known as ‘a nice respectable school’.

Some of the boys at Littleton were also positive about their school, boasting that “we are the best school in Hartsfield [borough]”. However, they contextualised this accolade in relation to other local inner city schools and felt that their school would not necessarily compare favourably to schools “outside London”, which they saw as “higher”. John’s mum was also happy with Littleton and Mark described Littleton positively when he compared it to other schools.

“Well when you’re at the school, right, you think, ‘oh it’s rubbish and all this’, but when you like hear about other schools and all that, you think that this school like is getting better and just- like cos I’m proud to say that I’m from Littleton”.

Jordan felt that the ethos and identity of Blackwell Street had changed and ‘smartened up’ with the arrival of a new head teacher:

Int: What it is like to be a student here?

Jordan Well a few years ago it was like you run wild, it was like a youth club, you come in for a few hours.

Int: And what’s it like now?

Jordan Now Mr. [head teacher] has come to- the schools really changed, there’s cameras everywhere, everyone’s suited and booted.

In contrast, pupils at schools like Riverway and Eastleigh had to juggle their own experiences with wider popular knowledge, in which their schools tended to be less favourably regarded. As Lacie said of Riverway, “It’s alright, it ain’t one of the best schools ever, but it’s alright”. Melissa (at Eastleigh Central) also felt her school compared less well with others “It is okay but I know better schools. My cousin’s school is really good”. As Reay (2004) and others note, the introduction of league tables and the policy emphasis on school ‘choice’ has resulted in the demonisation of many inner city schools. Pupils and their families at less popular schools revealed the dilemma of being associated with these negative connotations and stereotypes or myths about the school.

Among the parents interviewed, Lee's mum (Riverway) strongly valued the school and all they had done for Lee ("Well when he come to school he couldn't read or write and now he is doing GCSEs. So they have brought [him] up 100% with the education in here, literally 100%. [...] It is definitely meeting his needs definitely 100% even more than that") but described having to defend the school's reputation from others, like her sister in law:

"I am happy with the way they have brought him on I really am there is no fault in this school. Like his cousin's mum brought his cousin to see the school and she had the cheek to say 'I don't like it.' I went: 'why don't you like it?' And she went: 'the education is not there.' I went: 'what do you mean the education is not there?' I said, 'that school, 5 years ago Lee couldn't read and write and now he is sitting GCSEs I said that is how much that school has brought him up.' I said, 'don't sit there and say that school don't teach.' And she went, 'I don't think it has got enough education.' And so I went, 'well I think you are talking out of your ass,' oh she did wind me up. And I said to my mother-in-law, 'it does wind me up when I hear people saying that because they don't even know the school they don't know kids what go to this school and so why drag the school down?' My kid has come in literally not being able to read or write and now he is sitting GCSEs I said that is how much the school is shit."

While the young people expressed a range of positive sentiments about their schools, they also made a lot of negative comments. As Lucy (Riverway) put it:

Lucy: Don't like it.  
Int: What don't you like it?  
Lucy: Everything.  
Int: Like-?  
Lucy: Just don't like coming.

One of the factors raised was that of the school's environment. For example, Dan at Riverway said that he did not like the school at all, based on finding it "like a prison" (after its installation of an internal swipe card system):

Dan: The school is getting like a prison now the new classrooms and the way it is all done is like a prison.  
Int: What makes you say it is like a prison, what particularly is it about it?  
Dan: Because they are putting more and more doors in the building and it is getting annoying opening doors. Before it just used to be no doors only a couple and it used to be open.

Other pupils at Riverway (in the year 11 focus group), were also very negative about the school environment:

Lucy: It's a shit hole.  
Lucy: I don't know, there's water leaking from the ceiling.  
Verona: Rats in the kitchens.  
Lucy: Yes rats in the kitchens. Rats have been seen running around where we sit and eat our dinner.  
Verona: And that's no joke.

Int: Ok.  
Bob There is no question about that.  
Lucy It is really like a shit hole.

However, not all Riverway pupils felt this way and in the context of his photo diary, Babu described the trees in his school playground as “it is alright, it’s nice”.

As will now be discussed in turn, pupils and parents also argued that disengagement was exacerbated by various issues concerned with the curriculum and teaching/learning issues (5.4) and teacher-pupil relations (5.5).

## 5.4 Curriculum

A sizeable proportion of the young people indicated that they were disengaged from aspects of the formal school curriculum. For many pupils, this disengagement appeared to be underpinned by difficulties with (and a dislike for) reading and writing. However, this is not to say that the young people were completely disengaged from learning and the curriculum: many expressed a preference for learning ‘practical’ subjects and though interactive and/or ‘hands on’ activities (this theme will be returned to in Section 7.3 with regard to vocational college-release schemes).

Difficulties with and/or a dislike of **reading and writing** were common. Peter, for example realised that this would impact negatively on his future chances, but maintained:

“I can’t put pen to paper like that little thing there. I hate writing I hate it and that is one reason why I can’t stay in my lesson because it is always written work and I hate writing. I can write and I can read, I just don’t like it”.

Numerous other pupils felt similarly. Sarah explained that “I am good at answering questions [in class] but I am not good on paper”; Babu admitted that he finds writing essays difficult because “I can’t write much” and Lee found copying from the board and doing worksheets hard. Lacie recounted how she continues to struggle in lessons, particularly in science

“Well we have these books and we have to read it all and then answer the questions and it is quite difficult for me to read everything when they all long words and I can’t read it. [...] I get annoyed because everyone else I think is cleverer or better than me at English and I get frustrated”.

The problems that young people experienced with reading and writing generated low confidence and low self-esteem and increased likelihood of truancy. As Lacie put it, “I ain’t

no good at reading and spelling and I just get, I dunno I get frustrated if I can't do nothing and so I just don't like going".

Several pupils, like Lee and David had arrived at their secondary schools being unable to read and write and had since received additional support ("At the beginning it was hard and that was because I couldn't write and read properly. So I had special needs lessons and I learned properly from there"). Similarly, the help that Darren received in secondary school made him finally feel "[when] I started getting over them [...] I got smart. Now it's like better for me".

As noted in Section 4.4, EAL pupils found the adjustment particularly hard.

"It was hard, because I didn't have a clue what they were doing in the classroom and I was sitting there and I couldn't do the work because I couldn't understand it because I couldn't read it and I couldn't speak English either" (Jermina).

In contrast to more literacy-based subjects, many young people expressed a preference for more **practical and/or vocational subjects**. For example Babu named his "best lesson in school" as the support option where "we talk" rather than do written work (see also 7.6 on citizenship education). Ben summed up this preference in terms of the ability to feel a sense of achievement:

"I'd just rather do practical stuff like every day all day. Like I could sit there - put a car in front of me, tell me what to do and I'll fix it. Put work in front of me I'll sit there and take as long as I want on it. The car I'll do it there and then because it's something that I've achieved, it's done".

Various pupils suggested that their concentration and engagement was vastly increased in lessons with practical elements (although as Scott in the Year 10 focus group at Hillside Park also recognised "there should be some writing at least, because otherwise without writing you are not going to learn, you won't be able to read and write"). Kyle explained that her favourite subject is textiles because there are "lots of activities" and Lacie stated that what she enjoys about art is "the getting my hands dirty and the drawing".

The 'practical' element of lessons was broadly defined, and seemed to encompass any interactive method or any activity that was not simply copying down notes or completing written worksheets or exercises. Nathan, for example, said "I prefer working on computers than writing" and Lee suggested "at least in English you stop for a little while and like read a book, or like [...] do some posters. But in Science you have to copy from a book or from the board all the time". Lee said he particularly missed the practical aspect of science (doing experiments)- which he also blamed on the class being led by a supply teacher. By the third

interview Lee talks increasingly about being sent out of lessons for talking back to teachers, which seemed to correlate with an increasing focus on lessons becoming less practical.

Lee's preference for 'practical' subjects also reflected his difficulty in "sitting still" in class. He thus preferred activities to be broken up into different segments and was particularly engaged by physical activities like PE: "you don't have to do a lot of writing and stuff. It's more physical. It's better"). This was reinforced by his mum:

"With Lee and it's physical and you are using your brain and your hands he will like it but when it is writing and all that he will just put it aside and say I can't be bothered".

Lee reported finding it difficult to concentrate in class and described feeling "agitated" and unable to sit still (for which he then gets told off). His love of sports also provided a therapeutic benefit ("it can like release your anger"). His mum agreed:

"He was a little shit when he started this school he was forever getting in trouble, I think he still is, I couldn't tell you. But since he started the rugby, he seems to help take out his anger on the pitch and so it has done him well to start that sport".

However, his love of sport and need to be outside doing something physical also impacted negatively on his engagement, as- by Lee's own account- he rushes his homework and coursework in order to get outside to play rugby. He also broke his leg after the phase 3 interview, which resulted in him missing a substantial period of school.

Practical lessons were liked and valued not only because they avoided reading/writing but also because they offered the chance for pupils to display a competency and feel that they were 'good at something'. This resulted in patterns of selective engagement- where many pupils were engaged with a couple of areas, but disengaged from the rest. For example, Analisa liked drama and had chosen it as an option because "I can act, I'm quite good at that", Kay felt she was good at art and drama and Jane is highly engaged in Photography, Art and Music and produces herself as "an artistic person". However, she is deeply disengaged from "the scientific kind of things", like maths and science. Charlene chose French because she "stayed in Belgium" and "could speak French fluently" and textiles because "I like to do domestic work". Various boys and girls also liked sports and felt they were good at it, so had taken PE as an option. A focus group pupil also explained how drama "like expresses the emotions I'm feeling in anything".

Pupils' views of subjects also followed a broadly gendered pattern, with girls tending to say that they preferred stereotypically 'feminine' subjects such as drama, art, and English, while the boys stating that they prefer subjects like PE. However, drama was equally popular among boys and girls. The issue of whether pupils felt competent or confident in their abilities also structured their subject options, with some pupils displaying a more instrumental attitude— saying that they made strategic choices, based on which subjects they thought they could get the best grades in.

As one member of staff argued, young people who suffer from damaged academic learner identities and lack confidence due to poor literacy/ numeracy skills are not necessarily lacking any level of skill or ability – and may be more engaged in other aspects of the curriculum or wider life:

"Okay, [it is a] total lack of confidence. Most of them have really poor literacy and numeracy skills, so they haven't anywhere along their formal education, really received what they should have had, or they haven't taken it in. [...] The youth service [...] have seven types of measurement for intelligence which includes music, sport, movement. Young people have loads and loads of skills, and some of them just can't write very well or read very well, but they're absolutely brilliant at other things, you know? And unfortunately, it's really the literacy and numeracy things that mean you achieve at this age" (Connexions Advisor).

A few pupils did indicate a **love of learning** in itself. For example, David at Littleton stated "I like all of them [subjects] cos I want to learn all of them". One boy in a focus group asserted that he liked history because "I'm really influenced by history". Robert enjoyed media studies because of his deep interest in films ("I see films in a different way than when just watching (at home). I see how they make it and that") and Roger's favourite subject was Business Studies "cos it's something that you relate to, you know, take more interest in [...] Cos it's like what we're doing is like doing stocks and shares, and it's money, man". Lacie also mentioned the attraction to her of the challenge of learning a difficult subject and explained that she had always liked maths because "in a way I don't find it that easy it is the challenge that I like". It was also striking that even among pupils who were disengaged from the mainstream curriculum, boys like Dan and Lee described voluntarily undertaking extra curricula Japanese lessons, that were organised after-school. The boys both enjoyed these extra lessons, and seemed to view the classes differently to the rest of their lessons- even though the Japanese classes were organised by, and held at, the school. As Dan put it, "well it is not like a lesson [and] it gets me out of the house for an hour or so".

The photographic diaries also revealed some interesting insights into the engagement of pupils with aspects of the curriculum. For example, in Babu's photo diary the photographs revealed a different perspective within different classes. Whilst he sits at the back in the majority of his lessons, it was notable that in maths he was sat at the front. When asked about this, his response belied a greater engagement with maths, saying that he sits at the front because "it's a better view, I can see the board".

For many of the young people, their engagement with the curriculum was shaped according to whether they perceived the subjects or classes in question as **relevant to their future lives**. As Leah put it,

"One of the reasons I like them is because I think they are useful for me because I aim to get a good job I want to do bank stuff or something like that".

This engagement with curriculum was also noted among staff as an important factor affecting engagement:

"You bring kids in, [but if] they can't adapt to the curriculum they're going to bunk. But the government is saying that they should be doing GCSEs is another matter, I don't think they should." (Head of Year 11).

"And the reason for truancy and the reason for disaffection I fear is more to do with the lessons that we offer than the actual school" (Deputy Head).

Many young people said that they liked or opted for subjects that would help them in their future occupations (e.g. Mark said "like when you do business [studies] you can get loads of jobs when you're older"), and these choices mainly centred on more applied or vocational subjects, such as food technology (e.g. Darren, who wanted to be a chef) or business (e.g. Nadia "because I want to do something with business"). Thus, they expressed a preference for subjects that relate directly to their aspirations, or that will help them to enter the labour market. For example, Ben is doing a GNVQ in leisure and tourism, which he sees as directly relevant for his goal to work in an airport. Germaine said "I'm doing sports science so I can be a physio and work in a gym anything like that" and Yesim felt ICT would be important for helping her to get "office work" in the future. Kemisha regarded science as useful due to her aspiration to work in health / social care.

A number of pupils became more engaged with particular subjects as they started to realise (or be advised during careers interviews) that they would need core subjects for a wide range of jobs and training opportunities. Hence over the course of the project, some boys came to

re-evaluate maths and English when they learned that these subjects were required for some of the trades apprenticeship courses. Bob, for example, came to see English and maths as important in order to get a BT apprenticeship (“I’m focusing on them as much as other subjects because you need them grades to become an apprentice”). Tyson also recognised that “English is important like if you want to study law” and Lacie felt “a computer always comes into a job”.

Conversely, pupils reported being disengaged from subjects that they perceived to be **irrelevant** to their lives. For example, Roger felt that he didn’t like science because “I’m not planning to be a scientist”. RE was singled out in particular as irrelevant to pupils’ future lives- as Nathan, Germaine and Verona all agreed that they could not perceive any use in it (“I’m not a religious person and I don’t know anything about God and things”, Verona). Jane similarly agreed that she finds RE “really really boring [because] I just really hate learning about God because I feel like such a strong atheist, whereas, like, I’m really into debating and stuff, and I don’t like it. I just sit there with my opinion”.

Parents also tended to see the value of the curriculum in terms of its relevance to their children’s future lives- although as the following example suggests, there may be scope for schools to help families to recognise that subjects (like science, history and modern foreign languages) can open up a broader range of careers than previously assumed. For example, Lee’s mum assessed his curriculum in the following way:

“Well Japanese, no - he ain’t going to go and get a job. Science, no - because he ain’t going to be a forensic scientist. English and maths he really needs because he can’t walk into a job without education, that thing. History I’m not too sure but he loves- likes- history. And PE I think he wants to do that because he wants to become a coach”.

A few pupils felt that none of their subjects were useful or relevant to them

“Useful to me? None of them!” (David, Hillside Park).

“I don’t even know what the point is of school really. For instance yeah when they teach English I don’t even know I am getting taught English. I *am* English, and then they are saying to me ‘blah blah blah, you have got know how to speak proper English’ and all this shit and I don’t see no point”. (Max, Littleton School / PRU).

Thus, for many pupils, the perceived relevance of the curriculum was related to whether they felt it would help them get a job later in life.

Some pupils described choosing their optional subjects as a ‘non-choice’ (e.g. randomly selecting between feasible options that they had no interest in) and those pupils who felt that they had had little or no choice in their subject options also appeared more disengaged. For example, Babu said that he did not ‘choose’ his GCSE options (“I didn’t get none of them”) but was assigned alternatives because “there ain’t no space” in his preferred options. He claimed not to attend these lessons on the basis that he had not chosen them and did not enjoy them. This points to the importance for young people to be able to feel and exercise a sense of ownership and control and over their learning.

## 5.5 Setting

A lack of confidence and low self-esteem was frequently associated with the common practice of setting. This was also recognised by some staff as a factor within disengagement and truancy:

“The main issue that I find when I walk around is ‘why haven’t you gone to lesson? Why haven’t you gone in?’ and I try to find out the issues. Is it difficult? You need help? [...] It ends up coming down to that they have no friends in that classroom that they get on with because when they get up to upper school, year ten, they’re obviously assigned to certain levels [...] foundation [or] higher and because their friends are in a higher foundation they don’t want to go. The other day I had one student who refused to go to their maths. I say why don’t you go and it’s, because I sitting with dumb people here, she’s in the lower group and that’s what she feels, it’s only dumb people in there and I don’t get on with them” (Learning Mentor).

Most of the young people in the study reported being in middle to low level sets, with a few notable exceptions, like Jane, who stated “I’m in the top set for everything”. Middle and higher sets were preferred and were associated with more positive views on learning and higher self-esteem. Dan (also at Riverway) had recently moved up a set for maths and science and felt comfortable with his new position “I am glad that I have been moved up because I learn a bit more now”. Many of those in the middle sets reported feeling comfortable with their position, for example, Bob (at Riverway) states that “I feel comfortable with them cos the C band’s easy and the B band that I’m in is going all right at the moment”.

Mark at Hillside Park had been moved down to the middle set science because he was finding the work in the top set too difficult. However, in his explanation of the issue, he indicates the hierarchical ordering of sets and the stigma attached to the bottom ‘bum sets’:

“Yeah, we have one to three and then four to six. It goes one half of the year is one, two three and then the other half is four, five, six and six is the top set and one is the top set. And so four and three are bum sets. I’m in the top set for maths, the top set for maths for English and the second set for science. I prefer to be in the second set for science because the top set is like really hard. I was in the top set and I have been put down”.

A young person in the year 10 focus group at Littleton similarly summed up the issue of stigma and asserted that ‘bottom set’ identity could foster low self-esteem, bullying and a resignation to failure:

“I understand why they do that ranking counter that sets 1, 2, 3 but I don’t think they should do it like that. They have their reason to because it puts people down because if you’re, you get a person - People in Set 1 usually are like people that will go round boasting or something like that going “ah I’m in Set 1, what’s this, what’s this question what’s this answer”. And then people in Set 6, like their confidence is kind of low in a way, or they’re just like really random and can’t be bothered with school. But I don’t think they should do it because like when they give you that lower of things to do it makes you feel that ah you can never compare to people like in Set 1. And just with school children and that, sometimes they can be so horrible to the children [in the bottom sets] so they don’t like going to school and things like that”.

Unsurprisingly, those pupils who were placed in lower sets were generally not happy with their location at the ‘bottom’, where they felt labelled as ‘stupid’ and where it was commonly felt that less learning took place. For example, Jermina states “In science, since year 8, I’ve always been in the lower group and I feel like I am not improving at the science at all”. Similarly, Kemisha felt “Not good, because it is the lowest class and I am not feeling good about that”. Yesim was also unhappy that she had been moved to the lower set from the middle (“[I felt] bad because I thought I was doing more better so I thought I would go higher but somehow I went down”).

The pupils in the bottom sets had to contend with being positioned as ‘stupid’ - which some of them strongly resisted. For instance, Yesim said of her new position in the lowest set “Sometimes I do feel cleverer than them [...] you see what goes on in a class when the teacher asks the questions, they rarely answer and when they do answer its always they do a mistake or get it wrong, but whenever I answer I always say it correct”.

## 5.6 Teacher-pupil relations

Teacher-pupil relations were identified by pupils as a crucial factor affecting their engagement and achievement at school. Where relations were positive, pupils engaged and attended more regularly, but where they were poor, pupils disengaged and/or absented themselves.

A significant number of pupils complained that they had difficulties in understanding the work in class and felt that they were not getting enough support with their learning from their teacher – which prompted disengagement and absenteeism. Considerable emphasis was placed on teachers being able to provide explanations of the work and additional assistance and clarification. For example Babu wanted teachers to “make more examples” and to clarify the tasks: “they write on the board and say answer the question, and they don’t even explain what you have to do”. Steven described his experience of school as “dreadful” because “Like, if we need help we get told [we’re] stupid and told to go away so I hated that. So it was just boring”. Lacie distinguished between her experience of science- where she feels the teacher helps her- and English, where she complains that the teacher does not come over to help her. In his phase 3 interview (after he had left school), Steven compared the support he now received at college to his experience of school:

“It was terrible, the school [...] Well the teachers hardly listened and everything and at college now they will listen, like, to me. Like, cos as I went for the induction day they were asking all these questions and like, if you need help and that they can supply everything for you. But the school they didn’t even ask you if you needed help or anything”.

Melissa also found that whilst the work at college was difficult, she found it easier to ask for help in her new environment than had been the case at school:

“ I mean like some of the work, yeah it can get a bit hard at times, but all you need to is just put your hand up and ask for help from the teacher. Like, erm, in [school] I never used to do that, I never used to ask for help, I was too embarrassed, or shy. But now I wish, I was like, I wish I asked for help, I might have got better grades in my GCSEs”.

Like others, Lee found that his engagement was improved when there is extra classroom assistance available. In particular he valued being able to put his hand up for an assistant to come over and explain the work to him (“it is quite useful”). Where this support was not available, he described getting annoyed due to having to wait a long time for help to arrive. As he waited, he felt unable to do any work - for which he would then often get into trouble (a view reiterated by various young people).

A number of the parents also felt quite strongly that schools had not been able to provide an adequate amount of individual support to their children (see section 9.2 on parental recommendations). For example, Mike's mum wished that he could have "a bit more help with his reading and writing". Lacie's mum reiterated that she would like extra help in class and was concerned that her daughter might be dyslexic- and that the school "should have sort of picked it up a bit more". Babu's mum desperately wanted additional after-school-classes or tutoring for him to try to catch up.

The young people were near enough unanimous in their agreement that teachers (and teacher-pupil relations) had a huge effect on their engagement with school. Good interpersonal relations with members of staff were highly valued and increased engagement and attendance. As Darren put it, engagement in class and motivation to attend and do the work "doesn't depend on the subject, it depends if I like the teacher or not - if I like the teacher, I do it". Lee's mum also reiterated how Lee's engagement also varied according to the teacher:

"I know there is a [science] teacher here that can't stand him, she disliked him straightaway and every time he walked in [the class] she would kick him out [...] [but] He likes Mr O- the history teacher. He worships his form teacher Mrs J-, he worships her, he thinks the world of her".

Liking for a subject was frequently correlated with a pupils' liking for a particular teacher. For example Nadia explained that she likes English because she really likes the teacher. This generated an enthusiasm for English in Nadia, who become more engaged and borrowed a copy of Dickens' *Christmas Carol* (which they had studied the previous year) to re-read.

The pupils broadly agreed in their constructions of 'good' teachers. In line with the emphasis that many pupils placed on comprehension, good teachers were commonly described *as able to aid pupils' understanding* and *as willing to help pupils* with their work. For example, Babu said he likes his maths teacher because he "teaches better and explains more stuff and helps you a lot".

"I have some really wonderful teachers that really do explain things properly and thoroughly" (Jordan).

"I have always liked French it was just the teacher I didn't like last year. But this year I have got like a nice teacher and she actually makes me understand" (Jermina).

Good teachers were also described as building positive interpersonal relations with young people and demonstrating that they '*respect*', '*relate*' and '*care*' for pupils. Such teachers were described as showing an interest in pupils and their lives and being fair.

"I love the teachers at college I love them better than in thingy [school], erm, cos like they treat you like an adult, like a young adult. And you don't get to call them sir or miss you get to call them by their names" (Melissa).

Dan explained that he preferred teachers who "make it interesting and you can have a laugh with them". Lee also described how he was motivated to work harder in lessons where he felt that teachers shared his interests:

"They'll just sort of, like they'll speak to you about like football and stuff like that and rugby and not all boring classroom stuff. And they will, and then you sort of, once they speak about something like football or something you start to sort of settle down and do your work, you wanna do your work for that teacher. So you do your work for him so you get a good reputation".

A number of pupils talked with warmth about where they had good personal relationships with particular teachers: For example, Jermina felt she could talk to her English teacher, who she described as "she is like half my mum in this school". Nathan felt similarly "the English teacher was like, I could talk to him, like a good mate and would give me a hand with my work and that when I needed it". Jane also got on really well with her English teacher "she's really nice, like she, kind of, she's the same as me, like really arty and I get on with her." Lacie similarly valued her relations with teachers who showed that they cared about her

"Because if you are sitting there all upset even if you walk past them and you have an upset face they will always come up to you and make sure you are all right. And even if you are all right, they still come up to you and say, "you all right? How are ya?".

Through his photo diary, Tim seemed to have a good relationship with the life-skills teacher, who he described as "teaches everything" and "helps disengaged pupils". During the photo diaries interviews, pupils were asked to discuss each photograph in turn. When Tim reached the photograph that he had taken of this particular teacher, he put it to one side in order to go and share the image with the teacher. When he saw that this teacher was in the next-door office in the Learning Support Centre, he got really excited and tried to get the teachers attention to show him the photograph.

Good teachers were also described as being *fair* and measured in their discipline (*not too strict or lenient*). Such teachers were valued as being able to maintain discipline in their classes without having to resort to "shouting". For example, Jermina suggested "it would

make school more fun if you had a teacher that didn't shout a lot" and Max described preferring the PRU to school because "The teachers ain't so hassley and that. They ain't going mad at you all the time [...] The teachers are all right with us".

Nathan's description of his new art teacher was also reiterated by numerous other pupils as typifying the 'ideal' teacher ("he is alright. He is a bit strict but he is good with people and we don't really mess around"). The importance placed on teachers being able to maintain effective discipline was reiterated by a number of pupils, who recognised the benefits to their ability to "learn more" (Robert).

Conversely, the young people described how they disengaged in lessons with teachers that they did not like or where they could not understand or felt marginalised or ignored. For instance, Janine described herself as "not a very good pupil [...] I'm sometimes disruptive [...] some of the times, I don't actually listen to the teacher", but also explained that her disaffection was triggered by feeling invisible and not being given the appropriate help:

"I don't know, sometimes, in some lessons [...] the teacher will be talking to the whole class and I'll be sitting there thinking 'I don't understand what you're doing'. Then and then he'll go round, I'll be the first one to put my hand up and I'll sort of [say] 'don't understand what we're doing' and he'll go [...] to everyone else and by the time it's the end of the lesson, I'm still sitting there waiting to be told what to do. [And that makes you feel-?] Yeah, it makes me feel, not left out but makes me feel that *I'm just not there*".

Pupils described how they were more likely to be disruptive in lessons with teachers whom they did not like – for example Don said:

"I was in a bad class and I used to disrupt it - but I won't disrupt a different class because I got on with the teacher. You know if they [teachers] treat you badly I think you sort of want to annoy them".

And as one of the pupils, Lucy, in the year 11 focus group at Riverway explained, "it would be all right, everybody would respect them [if they respected us] but they treat us like shit so we treat them like shit". Conflict and disaffection was generated where pupils felt that teachers were unfair. For example, Germaine suggested:

"the teachers they just don't listen to you, they always seem to be like - I always have problems with teachers, [because] they listen to the teachers, but they don't listen to the students".

Babu also maintained strongly throughout the interviews that that he felt the school was unfair and biased against him:

“The school didn’t like me, [they] let him kick me. I told the school but they didn’t take no notice. They didn’t trust me, that is how the school works. [...] Every day I get in trouble for no reason and they take me down to Mr B-’s, they send me to exclusion every day.”

The poor interpersonal relations that Babu described between himself and the school were also borne out by one of the staff interviewed, who described Babu as:

“He won’t go to sixth form college, he will never go to university, he won’t have a job. He’s our local gangster. He’s trying to take over from someone else who left. No respect for education whatsoever, no respect for females whatsoever, out of control basically. He will be I would say, that he will be pushed off site before he gets to Year 11”

Interestingly, Babu stayed into Year 11, and was still in school by the time of the last interview for the project. He also developed positive relations with the white female researcher by his phase two/three interviews, coming across as engaged and co-operative, shy and friendly. Indeed, his engagement in the project was borne out by his completion of all three interviews, together with the photographic diary exercise and interview and facilitating his mother to take part in a parental interview.

Several young people complained that they felt victimised or unfairly picked on (as ‘bad’ pupils), compared to other pupils (who were seen as ‘good’). For example Kay felt that one of her cookery teachers “is always picking on me [...] Say if I have forgot my ingredients and another girl did yeah, she will give me a detention and she won’t do nothing to the other person”. Mark also felt disrespected and unfairly picked on by a teacher kept referring to him as ‘boy’. Similar views were expressed by Analisa and Babu:

“Like everything that you did they complain, they make a big issues about nothing. Like nothing, they’re stupidness and they make big issues out of it. They could do something like I don’t know you could do the most minor things and they just put you on report or something” (Analisa).

“If I say I am off and they’re gonna say ‘why you out of lesson? have you got a note?’ If I have a note I am going to show it to them and they are going to take me to the headmistress and then I’ll say to the teacher [...] there’s no need of that.” (Babu).

Steven and Verona also complained that teachers seemed to not be able to give them a second chance or reward them for good behaviour:

“I was real good at school but now the last couple of years [but] because the Teachers have all treated me like crap and that I think, well go away I am not going to do anything.” (Steven).

“... And I went ‘can’t you just give me a second chance? Because this year I really want to prove myself I can do it’ and he still won’t give me a chance” (Verona).

Melissa also felt disengaged because she could not escape from being seen by her teachers as naughty:

“...most of the Teachers have this grudge against me, like she is the ... always keep your eye on her because I am always in ...naughty and stuff. Whatever I am doing they are always looking at me, always trying to see what I am up to and I really hate that.”

These pupils thus all felt that their efforts to reform were thwarted by teachers’ stereotypes of them as ‘bad’ pupils.

Mike’s mum also brought up the issue of labelling, suggestion that some pupils (like her son) found it difficult to escape from negative assumptions about their behaviour:

"I think the trouble is once you, when you come up from Year Seven if you’re finding it hard and you haven’t got the right sort of help or the right sort of teachers that will sort of say, alright we’ll sit down and look at it. [But] once you’re labelled as someone who is going to say ‘I can’t do it’ and starts shouting, it just carries you through, it stays with you wherever you go."

This notion was also picked up in a couple of staff interviews, for example Tyson was described as: “has been a problem since he arrived”.

**Supply teachers** were identified as a particular source of problematic relations between teachers and pupils. As members of staff also recognised, pupils’ engagement often diminished in lessons with supply teachers due to the lack of stability and lack of time to build up good interpersonal relations:

“We have many supply teachers and kids bunking. [They] have a quick look, ‘oh it’s a supply’ and they’ll just bunk because they know the supply is going to have any work on them, actual work. They know the supply teacher is not going to realise that he’s away or whatever so they won’t go ... Also, when you have a teacher continuously, they keep track of what you’re doing because with a supply teacher nothing is actually being recorded” (Learning Mentor).

“If a supply teacher comes to this school, the students they know of course they’re supply teachers and they will try and get away with doing nothing or they will try and cause trouble and mess around etc. But supply teachers know that if they’re here for a period of time, if they’re here for one week then I’m sure they’ll have a really tough week. If they reappear the following week then it will be a little bit easier. The students do get used to their faces and the longer you’re here, without a shadow of a doubt, the easier it becomes for you...The students like stability. They like teachers being here and staying here. They don’t like teachers to come and go and they feel a little bit let down sometimes by staff that come and go pretty quickly. Stability for them is really, really important. Of course, it’s even more important in the upper school I suppose. When you have six different English teachers in your final year at GCSE level, that’s not going to be very helpful is it? But these things happen don’t they?” (Head of Year 10).

Lee likewise agreed that his engagement lessens with supply teachers (“we don’t do no work with supplies”) and various young people reiterated the above head of year’s point about feeling let down by high rates of teacher turnover.

“With my Science I haven’t done any coursework because we have had about five or six different Teachers for the last two years because my old Science Teacher she kept on getting pregnant, kept on having babies, so she left and that and we have just been stuck with supply teachers every single day for ages” (Steven).

## **5.7 Home/ school relations and interactions**

Home-school relations were generally regarded as being very important by parents and staff alike. Positive home-school relations were characterised by regular, close contact between school and home, which helped to keep pupils engaged and attending.

"Links with parents are crucial, to call parents, to inform them that the students are not here. That’s probably the most important thing cos sometimes parents don’t know about it and often when they do know they can be effective in ensuring that the child comes to school." (Head of Year 10).

"All my parents have got a mobile number so they can reach me at any time." (Head of Year 11).

As noted previously, Lee’s mum was full of praise for the school and felt that the teachers had helped Lee enormously. She described the regular and close contact that she enjoyed with the school and she clearly valued her relationship with the school and felt it to be invaluable for supporting her son. She regularly received letters from the school about Lee’s attendance ("it's normally every day, well once a week") and felt "it is good because if he don't come to school and I don't phone the school up they will phone up and say 'why ain't Lee at school today?'. The use of letters between home and school enabled Lee’s mum to find out the aspects of his behaviour at school that Lee liked to keep quiet:

"When he has been sent to [exclusion room] Lee won’t tell me - it's when I get my letters...They send a letter home to let me know that he has been excluded from English on so and so day. He says, 'I didn't do it I weren't doing nothing' but he is always getting told off at school and so they are good with that".

She describes how she actively encourages the school to maintain regular contact with her in relation to all Lee’s misdemeanours, for both behavioural issues and non-completion of homework:.

“Lee went "please don't phone my mum" [to teacher] and I said, 'no, you phone me when he does that I am not having it.' He is there to learn and not to give fucking verbal abuse, but they do - the way them kids speak it is disgusting".

"He says 'I have always handed [homework] in on time or bit late' but Lee don't hand in homework. Yeah because I will grass Lee up - it don't matter what he does because I always look in his journal every night when he comes home from school. In Year 7 he weren't too bad. In Year 8 And Year 9 and Year 10 his journal was completely empty. I said to his teacher 'I can't make the kid do homework if he ain't written in his journal' and so now they make Lee bring his journal to write it in".

As the above extracts illustrate, Lee would often try to disrupt the flow of communication between home and school and would try to confound his mum's and teacher's attempts to monitor his work and attendance. He would also hide that he was not always making full use of the extra support that had been arranged for him:

"I don't know I think he still gets his help [with his GCSEs] but with Lee he says 'oh I can't be bothered I will speak to you later' and so he don't tell me. I have to find out on like the parents evening. I think he is entitled 9½ hours help and so I think he still does get his help. But with him he is saying he don't need it no more".

Both Babu's mother and John's mother also had direct contact with the school, which they used to check up on their son's attendance.

"Well my little one [John] he don't like school at all and so we have to keep phoning the school up to check on him".

John's mum expressed satisfaction with the school – and did not expect the school to be able to make special allowances for her child:

"Well there are so many in the school I don't expect, you know, them to keep check on one kid all the time and that and so... You know there are so many kids in the school."

John's mum's comment contrasts starkly with the middle class parents in other studies and illustrates the classed dimension of interactions between home and school. She does not expect 'special treatment' and does not express the feelings of entitlement or the demanding of particular educational 'rights' or special support for her child that has been noted among middle class parents in other studies (e.g. Reay 2004; Reay 1997; Reay 1998b).

Mike's mum reported being generally happy with the level of contact that she had with the school ("I mean, they are pretty good anyway. If there's trouble they'll like phone you and things like that"). However, as developed further below, a gap did start to emerge regarding Mike's enrolment on the vocational college release scheme.

Some staff were very positive about the relations that they had managed to build up with parents and praised the level of parental engagement with their children's schooling. It was suggested that home-school relations in multiethnic schools were facilitated when the school is able to provide documents translated into community languages to families and when there is a larger proportion of minority ethnic staff.

"... the involvement of all our teachers from ethnic backgrounds does play a great role because for some of the kids they act as role models [...] The family for these kids they feel comfortable here because they see the Turkish teacher around... They feel comfortable here." (Assistant Head).

Particular schemes (like the mentor scheme at Blackwell Street for pupils who are borderline C/D at GCSE) also involved a lot of contact with parents and were described in favourable terms.

A number of **gaps** in home-school communication were also identified by parents and staff. In comparison to the satisfaction expressed by several of the mothers, Lacie's mum felt that contact between herself and the school was not sufficient. In particular she wanted to be informed more often, more promptly and in more detail about issues concerning her daughter's behaviour, in order that she might reinforce the issue at home:

"I think they could do just a little bit better than that because you know like if, you know if they get sent to [the exclusion room] or something like that, they don't inform you that day. [You get] a letter sort of a week, week and a half later, which I don't think that's any good. How they expect you to punish 'em for something that's happened a week and a half ago? And they don't say what they've done. It's 'disrupting the class' but doing what though? They don't explain anything".

An issue also emerged between Mike's family and the school with respect to his enrolment on a vocational college release scheme. She suggested that she had agreed to Mike participating in the 1 day a week scheme because she had been told that Mike would be able to study plumbing at a particular college (Mike wanted to become a plumber). However, she indicated that after she had signed the form, Mike was then sent to a different college ('Riverside') for 5 days a week, on the basis that the school felt 'we don't think he's any good here and he won't get no GCSE levels'. Whilst she agreed to this change, she was annoyed that the school failed to inform her that Riverside did not do plumbing courses, only 'multi-skills'. She was furious and felt that the school had "lied" to her.

"There wasn't really a lot of contact to do with him going to [college release], you know, it was more like, you got a lot of letters more than personal contact unless you made a point of coming in and facing them".

Once Mike had started on the vocational college release scheme, his mum noticed that contact with the college was better than it had been with the school (“The college have an open evening every, I think it’s every month, we go to speak to the tutor [...] They are pretty good in that respect [keeping you informed]”).

Various members of staff also recognised that despite some parents trying very hard to keep their children out of trouble and engaged at school, this was not always successful.

“His mum is trying very hard with him but not necessarily succeeding and the probability is that he will maybe end up in a young offenders” (Head of Year 11).

Gaps between home and school seemed to be exacerbated by differences of social class. As the literature suggests, working class parents ‘tend to feel less empowered in dealing with the children’s teacher and the demands of the school’ (Bempechat and Ginsburg, 1989:3). Similarly, Hanafin and Lynch’s (2002) southern Irish study revealed that working class families often wanted more parental involvement in school, but felt unwelcome in the school environment and nervous or intimidated when meeting teachers (ibid:46), a point that was acknowledged by some staff:

"I think they are other parents who are desperately frightened of school and education and so actually find it quite hard to even come in and talk to us." (Social Inclusion Curriculum Manager).

Many of the parents also appeared to be unclear about details concerning what subjects their children were taking or how their learning was organised, which made it difficult for them to take a more engaged role. For example, Lacie’s mum was unsure whether her daughter was being taught in sets at school or not:

"Err, I think so. I wonder if, hang on, let me see if [asks her son]. I don’t know, I don’t go school, do I? Alright yeah, my son’s saying that, he’s in a lower year, but he’s saying everything changes to that, so - If she was here then I could sort of ask her, sort of thing".

Working class parents tended not to have detailed knowledge and information about the education system, which could put them/their child at a disadvantage at key decision-making points, for example around subject choices and post-16 choices. However, Lee’s mum enjoyed good relations with particular teachers at the school, who helped to provide the family with this kind of valuable cultural capital and knowledge about the system. For instance, it was only on the advice of one of his teachers that resulted in Lee being entered for any GCSE examinations (rather than an ‘achievement award’). As Lee’s mum recounted:

“One of the teachers in here wanted him instead of sitting for his GCSEs to do an achievement award. But his other teacher said 'he is well brainy up there than what they are putting him down for - don't let him do an achievement award because they [employers] don't give a shit about the kids who do an achievement award' [Q: What kind of stuff does that involve and achievement award?] Hardly nothing it is not like the exams they have got to do for GCSEs. With them if they go well he will get a grade and with the achievement award I think it is just a little certificate they get. He said to me, 'Mum, I don't want to do it, I want sit my GCSEs' and so his teacher went 'yes!'”

Some staff also felt there was a gap to cross in terms of bringing the interests of parents and the school together – and as one member of staff suggested, parents sometimes wanted or needed more help than the school could provide. Although as the following extract also suggests, there may be a role for greater outreach work with parents to support them to support their child:

"I do sometimes fear that school and the efforts that we make to put certain things in practice in school are not supported at home and I sometimes think that isn't always due to a, sometimes it's our fault because we haven't communicated to them clearly enough or we haven't, you know, made the issue real for those parents, But I do sometimes [...] I think it is to do with parents not wanting to have issues and confrontations with their kids because I think they kind of are very scared that they are going to lose their children to whatever is out there. [...] Unfortunately the lack of ability then for that parent to put into practice the things which we talk about in the meeting seems to be an issue. I am certainly not trying to blame families for everything but I think that there is an issue there. I think that they do support the school, they come in their droves to evenings, they want help but unfortunately I think they want too much help. I think that a great many of our parents actually would love it if we could somehow go and help them in the evenings as well and at the weekends and things because I don't think that they are able to parent their children very well" (Deputy Head).

## **5.8 Experiences of Exclusion**

Almost every pupil in the study had some experience of being excluded whilst at school. This ranged from being sent out from specific lessons to internal exclusion areas, being put onto a part-time timetable, through to fixed term suspensions and to attending alternative educational centres, like Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). A number of the pupil interviews were held in PRUs (for those pupils who had been referred there).

Most schools had an internal exclusion room, where pupils could be sent if they were being disruptive. Such rooms were described by the young people in varying ways – as simply providing an alternative ‘time out’ space for pupils to reflect on their behaviour and /or continue with their work, or being seen as stigmatised and negative places:

“Like when you do something bad in school in your lessons you’re sent to a place where a teacher supervises you and you get to write a form and say why it happened and how you can change it”, (Analisa, Cowick).

“It is a room where your teachers if they can’t handle you in the class and you have been naughty so they send you down there and there is a teacher supervising it and sometimes after that you get another detention”(Lacie, Riverway).

“No you just sit in there and do work or you can just sit there and not do work it is your decision. You gotta make it yourself” (Dan, Riverway).

Indeed, Verona speaks with pride of his record in the inclusion room:

“I think I went down in the history books in Riverway, my name, in one term I got sent there about 70 times”.

In contrast, Darrel felt stronger, and more negative, feelings about the Inclusion Centre:

“I don’t like it. It’s - the Inclusion is more like a prison. [*Pause: emotional*] When I get sent here sometimes I think it is unfair” (Darrel, Littleton).

Darren also described the stigma that was popularly attached to the inclusion centre in school:

“Well, its the Inclusion Centre- my form tutor says it’s Alcatraz.[...] Well, it’s not a good place, is it? People go in here for trouble, when they’re in trouble” (Littleton).

There was little difference between the physical environments of each school’s inclusion room/ centre, although pupils did tend to spend differing lengths of time there. For example at Riverway pupils tended to spend particular periods, or up to a day, in the inclusion room, whereas at Littleton, boys could undertake all their lessons in the inclusion centre for up to several weeks at a time (hence perhaps prompting the reference to it as a “prison”).

Those pupils who had experienced external forms of exclusion (such as suspension or being moved to a PRU) suggested that this form of action was given for more ‘serious’ misbehaviour, such as violence, fighting, drinking and smoking in school and swearing at teachers. For example, Babu described in one of his interviews how “I was excluded last week for a week because of the fighting” and Melissa explained how she was excluded for smoking and drinking:

“I mean I have got expelled about two months ago for drinking and smoking in school. The drinking was outside school but the thing is I only had that (*indicates small amount with her fingers*) much, a mouthful and I spat it out because it burnt my tongue but I still smelt of it and smoking, I was in (*smoking in the toilets at school*) and I was just smoking but loads of people smoke and I am 16 as well. Obviously you can’t smoke in school” (Melissa).

“Yes because they treat the students like they are idiots, most of them and when you start on the Teacher...I had enough one day so I started back and I got expelled. He started swearing

and slugging me off so I wasn't having any of it so I started swearing back and I got expelled" (Steven).

The young people who were 'sent home' did not really seem to see it as a substantial punishment; and it did not seem to act as a deterrent.

Int: How did you feel about being expelled?  
Melissa I didn't really... just a few months ago.. I didn't really care and I was at home for about two days so ...on Thursday, went back on Tuesday or Monday. Three days and stuff I got... I didn't really care.

Being 'sent home' was usually resolved through joint meeting between school, parents and the pupil:

"They didn't really call it excluded in the school. They say send you home until you are, until your parents come in but you know you not allowed to come back so it's basically exclusion. I've been sent home a lot of times and they say that I am not allowed to come back in until my aunt comes in" (Darrel).

Sometimes the meeting between home and school enabled the causes of the exclusion to be clarified to the pupil concerned. As Melissa's extract indicates- she said that previously she did not understand the rule that mobile phones must not be taken out in school.

Int: What happened when you went back to school [...]?  
Melissa: We had a meeting. My friend, my Mum and my brother because my Mum doesn't know English but my Mum come and my brother translated for her. The Teacher was saying, and also like I had my phone out and ...and the Teacher was like all shouting at me and, 'why did you have your phone out in lessons?' And I was like, 'I don't know I just had it out'... but [the teacher said] 'why do you feel we are not allowed phones in school? Somebody might see you and steal your phone'. Well, how was I meant to know that?

The time that pupils spent away from school- particularly those who were sent home- obviously impacted negatively on their learning. Often this time was not spent engaged in any form of learning or additional support, for example, Mike described being suspended for a week and a half, which he did not like it because it was boring: "I was bored [...] just watching TV".

However, for those pupils who were moved to PRUs, the experience tended to be described more positively, not least because pupils enjoyed the smaller staff: pupil ratios in the units and the increased individual attention. Max also described preferring the PRU ethos:

"The teachers ain't so hassley and that. They ain't going mad at you all the time and like it's not that hard to get, it's not like you don't have to wear uniform. It's not that long hours really and it's all right. The teachers are all right with us".

The potentially positive environment of the PRU was also summed up by a PRU teacher (and is returned to in the next section on ‘critical moments’):

“Last year we had two girls from [school] who couldn’t get a school place, they did not have a school place. They had six months out of school [...] and they were almost crying for some kind of education. We took them in and in six months we got them through. I got them through the maths and they got through their English in six months”.

## **5.9 ‘Critical moments’ prompting engagement (school and educational factors)**

A number of key critical moments prompted pupils to re-engage with schooling. These included: GCSEs (either obtaining poor results, or anticipating GCSEs on entry to Year 11); receiving additional help and study support from schools; being sent to a PRU; being given additional responsibilities at school and experiencing positive relations and support from a member of staff.

### *GCSEs*

By the time of the phase three interviews, those pupils who had been in Year 11 at the start of the project had received their GCSE results, and the original Year 10 pupils were now entering their GCSE year.

Among those young people who had received their GCSE results by phase 3, a number had re-engaged with education and returned to school or college in the autumn to retake their GCSEs after they had received lower grades than they had expected.

“Well, I got seven GCSEs but they weren’t all that, they were all low grades. That’s why I come back because I needed to get some good grades”. (Ben)

Low grades also prompted some pupils to re-evaluate their aspirations. For example, Darren said “I planned to be a chef but that’s changed now” after he failed to get the grade he expected in Food Technology.

The anticipation of GCSEs also prompted a range of changes in phase 3 among the new Year 11s, although in often divergent ways. For some, the prospect created a realisation that they would need to engage more seriously if they were to stand a chance of success in the examinations. Coming back to school after the summer break, Lacie decided to engage more with her Year 11 work:

- Lacie: dunno, I just wanna, I dunno I just wanna change what I've been doing and that, wanna start learning properly. I know I've only got a year left but I might as well start now.'
- Int- So what kind of stuff do you want to change?
- Lacie Erm, dunno, I am always late to lessons, but I wanna, I haven't been late to a lesson since I've been back. I just wanna basically be good. No I just said to my mum I can't wait to get back to school and she went 'what?' She went 'are you sure?' and I went 'yeah I can't wait to go back I just wanna settle down and be good now and do as much work as I can'
- Int And what did she say?
- Lacie She went 'are you feeling alright?' [...] yeah. But she said, 'no, good, you should be, you should have done it in Year 7'.

Verona also described how he was re-engaged in Year 11 and was no longer bunking:

'It is just pointless and not worth doing that [...] I just thought there is no point in bunking no more. You don't get anything out of it, you either get caught by the Police and get arrested [...] When I came to this interview before I wasn't really focussed, I just came to school, it was just a chore. But now I come to school and think you've got to do what you've got to do [...] I feel like I want to do well in life and by bunking you are not going to achieve nothing.'

Mark (Littleton) also changed his views about leaving school after his exams to get a job, and stated instead

'Now I am staying on in 6th form [...] because I know that I am not going to do very well in my exams and so I thought I will get a couple more qualifications [...] if I go back and get more A Levels it will open a bigger, like, door or whatever.'

Experiencing poor results in 'mock' examinations in year 10 also seemed to be a positive experience for Jane and Lee, as they saw Year 11 as a "second chance". Although not all pupils felt able to live up to their good intentions at the start of Year 11:

'I ain't learned nothing in school. [...] I tried to change it. I told myself I'd change it this year but...nothing changes.' (Robert)

The fear of failure at GCSE also, however, prompted a number of pupils to re-think and lower their previous aspirations. For example, Latoya changed her mind from wanting to become a lawyer to studying beauty ("Because history is hard I don't 'get' history. I just don't 'get' history it is just hard. And I probably won't get law and so that is why I have changed my mind"). The fear of failure also impacted negatively on Kemisha and Peter's previous assumptions about continuing into post-compulsory education:

'I just want to go straight to work [...] I don't think I will be able to get into any colleges [...] Because I don't think I am going to get good grades' (Kemisha)

'To tell you the truth I don't really think I'm even gonna get into a college [...] My grades are gonna be BS [bullshit], rubbish. Very bad, like. I know that.' (Peter)

### *Receiving additional help*

Babu, Bob, Jermina and Nadia all found that their engagement and achievement improved when they received extra learning support. Bob, for example, received help in class from teaching assistants in Maths and English over the course of a couple of months. He also started attending after-school coursework catch-up sessions and noticed ‘a big improvement’ in his work, which boosted his confidence to re-engage further (“I’m finding the work easier and I’m getting the support that I need in lessons [...] Like TAs, teacher’s assistants and they help you out a lot with your work and stuff like that”). Likewise, Babu underwent a change of attitude after receiving help – a point that his mum also described being happy about in her interview:

“No before, no. But it’s a bit easier now. I go to after school clubs and stuff. [...] I go to art after school, English to finish off my coursework and textiles. I’ve just started my coursework - I’m one year behind [...] it’s going to be OK, like you can do more work than before” (Babu).

Likewise, by phase 3 Jermina and Nadia were attending after-school sessions for Science and a Saturday school for English, Maths and Science:

“Yeah it helps me understand the things that I don’t understand in class, like, because when the teacher is, like, telling us in class and people are making a noise you don’t understand that much, but then on Saturday school there are just a few people and the teacher explains more. And if you don’t understand you ask, and they explain it all to you again” (Jermina).

When pupils were provided with the extra support that enabled them to feel that they “understand” the work in question, their engagement and attendance was clearly boosted. Individual assistance in class, and the smaller classes and increased contact provided in after-school classes all helped pupils to get to grips with the work and feel more confident in their ability to learn.

### *Pupil Referral Units*

For James, Max and Roger, moving to the PRU constituted a critical moment in their education that seemed to prompt their re-engagement. They all recounted attending more regularly and seemed to be happier at the PRU compared to being in school. James, for example, felt that the PRU was a good experience because the small classes provided “a lot of help”. He preferred it to school and admitted that at school “I would have just carried on bunking”. Max agreed that he preferred the attitude of teachers and the ethos at the PRU:

“...I’m glad that I’ve come here. It’s made a big difference like. I reckon it’s better than school anyway. Teachers in schools- to do better for themselves- could just be a little bit lighter on the pupils and that. And don’t be so moany at them”.

Before he came to the PRU, Max said “I was thinking that I won’t ever get a job” and was not even planning to sit his GCSEs. However, his time at the PRU fostered his self-confidence and gave him a more positive view of his future.

### *New responsibilities*

Being given new responsibilities or roles at school created a positive impact on the self-esteem and engagement of a number of pupils. For example, Jermina described how her self-esteem increased when she was made head of the class- which also increased her attendance:

“Sometimes I don’t want to bunk all the time because now I am the head of my class, my form so I have to be in all the time now...Every year group there has to be a class leader...All the class teacher voted for me [...] all the boys said [...] she is good and mature. And everyone trusts me, and everything, so they chose me. Now I have to be there so every morning. I get a certificate for that”.

Nadia was chosen to be a senior student (“It’s like a role model for younger students”) which also increased her attendance and sense of self (“You have to be good at attending, behaving in school, be very good”). This new role boosted her confidence particularly because it made her dad very proud (“He is really happy that I am senior student”).

### *Positive relations with members of staff*

Relations with Connexions advisors and Learning Mentors are covered in the respective sections on these services (7.1 and 7.4).

Relations with other members of staff also played a role in fostering re-engagement among pupils. For example Jade described the positive impact that the school counsellor had brought about:

“Because my school counsellor, she kept talking to me about it and she asked me to stop and my mum, she asked me to stop as well [...] She [counsellor] knows what to say, like she says all the right things. There’s nothing that she’s ever said wrong and she gives good advice [...] ‘I don’t think I’d be talking to you now [if not for her] cos I wouldn’t have been here. Cos I have history today, I wouldn’t have been in school!’”

Several pupils also spoke about the positive impact that particular teachers had on their behaviour. Yesim also described the critical moment when her tutor asked her about why her attendance and behaviour had been going down hill in Year 9:

“And because I really like my tutor I listened to her and what I want to do, yeah, is in Year 10 to work more harder and to always come to school [...] So now I come to school I do my work and whatever I have to do in school [...] I tell her everything, she’s like a mother to me. And whenever I tell her because I never lie to her or nothing, she always believes me”.

These relationships were so influential and successful due to combining a pastoral element (providing young people with help, support and counselling) and because they provided the young people with reassurance that they had someone in the school ‘on their side’, which often made the difference to how they felt about their relationship with the school.

## **SECTION 6**

### **ASPIRATIONS & POST-16 ROUTES**

Policy texts have tended to assume that low rates of progression into post-compulsory education and training reflect a prevalence of low aspirations among working class young people. Hence initiatives have been geared towards ‘raising’ young people’s aspirations as a means for increasing their motivation and engagement with learning. In line with such policy, many staff agreed that the young people lacked aspirations and drive (“they don’t have that aim in life”, as one Learning Mentor put it). This section looks in depth at the young people’s aspirations. It is argued in 6.1 that their aspirations should be understood as complex, dynamic and changing over time and many young people held two or more aspirations simultaneously. Section 6.2 discusses how the young people adopted a ‘wait and see’ approach to their aspirations and post-16 routes – and considers the implications of this for their chances of success. As detailed in 6.3, all the young people said that they aspired to get a job that would pay well, or enough, to provide them with some degree of social (or occasionally geographical) mobility. Views diverged however regarding the best route to achieve this goal. The views of those who wanted to enter paid employment as soon as possible are addressed in 6.4, and the views of those who expressed an interest in professional jobs are examined in 6.5 - although attention is drawn to how these ‘high’ aspirations were curtailed by external factors and inequalities.. For most young people, higher education did not feature within their aspirations (6.6) and university was mostly resisted as a desirable or possible option, although views on FE differed. The ways in which the young people’s aspirations and horizons of choice were shaped by their social locations, particularly through social class and gender (and their use of ‘hot knowledge’ and experiential forms of cultural capital) is considered in 6.7. A brief summary of the section is drawn together in 6.8.

#### **6.1 The complexity of aspirations**

Pupils were asked about their aspirations and expected post-16 routes in each phase of the study. Using a simple ‘count’, the most frequently mentioned aspirations among girls were hair/beauty and ‘care’ work, such as nursing or childcare (61% of girls, N=14 /23). Among boys, the most popular aspirations were to manual trades, such as plumber, electrician and mechanic (67% of boys, N=20/ 30). Nine pupils also aspired to joining the armed forces (5

boys) or the police (2 girls, 2 boys). Seven boys (23% of boys) aspired to being professional sportsmen (with the most popular sports being football and boxing). As will be discussed further in Section 6.5, sixteen young people also said that they aspired to professional careers (e.g. as a lawyer, teacher, accountant)- although this was strongly gendered, being cited by 11 girls (48% of girls) and only 5 boys (17% of boys). The gendered and class-based nature of the young people's aspirations is discussed further in Section 6.7.

This simple overview does not, however, convey the real complexity of the young people's aspirations. Over the course of the study, many of the pupils shifted in their ideas and indeed, many of them expressed a range of ideas and aspirations. Indeed, only a few of young people held a single idea that they continued to pursue over the course of the study - namely a couple of the boys who were interested in the armed forces, Mike, who planned to be a plumber, and David, who wanted to work in computer programming. Roger was one of the few pupils who maintained that he had 'no idea' at all regarding what he might do in the future. However, his bleak view was also shaped by the fact that he had a criminal conviction, and so felt pessimistic for his chances of future employment.

Most pupils not only changed their views over time, but also held more than one aspiration at once. A typical response is illustrated by Leah (a young Sikh woman at Cowick):

"I would like to work in a bank I don't know why- I like tills and things. When me and my cousins talk we always say we would like to work in an airport or a bank. Or I would like to work in a good clothes shop or something like that. Or maybe a nursery like my sister because I work in the nursery sometimes and I enjoy it".

Similarly, Steven said that he aspired to being "a computer technician, a plumber and mainly a policeman". Some young people talked about "giving up" on their previous aspirations over the course of the study. Sometimes this meant losing earlier unrealistic dreams (e.g. to become a pop star or a famous actor). But, as detailed in Section 6.8, wider social inequalities also impacted on young people, causing them to rule out their 'higher' aspirations as unrealistic, unattainable and 'not for the likes of me'.

The longitudinal tracking element of the study provided a picture of how the young people's aspirations were dynamic and fluid- they were not fixed or clear-cut by any means, and as noted above, many of the young people held onto two or more (often contradictory, rather

than complementary) ideas simultaneously. In some ways this reflected a pragmatic approach to their future lives, as most were unsure what qualifications they would obtain, and were exposed to high levels of risk (Beck 1991), hence were keen to 'keep their options open' and have 'fall-back' options in place. For example, Lee's aspirations changed considerably at each phase of the research. In his first interview (in Year 10) he appeared to be keen on joining the army, but in his second interview he had ruled this out and now felt that all his previous ideas were 'rubbish' and 'boring'. By the third interview (in Year 11), he strongly aspired to being a professional rugby player or a rugby coach, but with fall-back options of becoming either a mechanic or a cab driver. As his mum said,

"He wants to play rugby anyway and so, I said yeah but that ain't going to be your main job Lee you ain't going to get signed up for England that is not a main job you have got to have a job. And so he is saying a taxi driver he wants to be like his father".

As will now be discussed in the next section (6.2), many of the young people adopted a strategy of 'wait and see' in relation to their post-16 decisions, which tended to disadvantage them in various ways.

## **6.2 The deferment of aspirations: 'wait and see'**

Many of the pupils expressed a 'wait and see' attitude towards their future choices and post-16 routes. As Darrel put it, "I just take every day as it comes". Similarly, when asked whether he had any aims or ambitions, Jason (one of the higher achieving pupils at KS3) described his approach as "one step at a time":

"No, no, that's my biggest problem, I don't know. I don't know, like, I just can't think ahead for some reason. [...] I never really had one-like I say- don't really think ahead too much, like. I always find it difficult that. [...] It is like if I plan ahead it puts me off things, like, I just don't want to do it no more, like" (Jason).

Plans, choices and decisions about their futures were largely deferred until the young people received their GCSE results:

"When I'm gonna leave school maybe then I am going to think about it" (David, Littleton).

"I just want to check and see what I have got in my exams" (Hapsa, Blackwell Street)

The young people effectively saw their future options as determined by their GCSE grades. They felt that rather than specifying beforehand what subjects they might like to study at

college, or whether they might consider university, or what job path they might like to follow, their options would be determined by their GCSE results.

A few pupils were not simply waiting for their GCSE results, but were also waiting to see if other possibilities worked out. For example, Max wanted to wait and see whether he would get selected for a professional football team – and maintained that he would only look at other options if this was unsuccessful.

“No I am still going to try but I want to see what is happening with my football first of all and then, if nobody wants me, then I will just go for a job”.

Max had actually received assistance from Connexions who had found him an apprenticeship, but Max was adamant that he would only consider this as a third place, back-up option in the event that he could not find a job.

The young people’s approach thus echoed Ball et al’s (2002) ‘contingent’ educational choosers and Reay’s (1998) ‘never sure’ working class young people. Their choice trajectories stand in stark contrast to the ‘always knowing’ middle classes (Reay 1998), who tend to follow a firm plan or route are able to mobilise various forms of cultural, economic and social capital to help them maximise the opportunities on offer to achieve their goals (Ball 2003).

In this study, the young people’s deferment of their aspirations reflected their general lack of confidence in their own educational abilities and their fragile learner identities. For them, educational failure was a constant threat and they were genuinely unsure as to how they might fare in the examinations. In some ways, the strategy of deferment enabled them to minimise the identity costs (e.g. disappointment, shame) posed by the risk of failure because they were not hanging all their hopes on being able to pursue a single favoured option. It also provided a means for maximising their ability to negotiate failure, as it made them flexible to other options and to ‘make do’, according to the results they obtained.

However, this strategy of ‘wait and see’ also disadvantaged the young people in various ways. It often resulted in them missing out on important information and opportunities that would have helped them to achieve their desired goals. For example, some young people were not studying the most relevant subjects for pursuing their desired aspirations. They also

tended to be disadvantaged in terms of entry to further education because they ended up relying on late applications and hence found particular colleges or courses were already full. Kay, for instance, wanted to get a job as a holiday rep, but was waiting until she got her grades before she did anything about it. Both Jane and Jermina were also putting off thinking about whether to continue into sixth form or college:

“I haven’t really thought about it. I just thought of just getting my grades and then when I want to look into it I will have the grades to get in. I haven’t really thought of how to get there so far” (Kay).

“I don’t know whether I’m going to go to 6th form or not yet. I don’t really know what I’m going to do. I’m sure I’ll be sorted by then” (Jane).

“I haven’t thought about college or university or anything. I just want to wait until I’m in year 11 or in 6th form. I will then start talking to people about it. [Int: Why do you want to wait until then?] Because right now, even if- I know I’m not going to take it seriously” (Jermina).

As discussed further in Section 7.1, this deferment of choice meant that a number of pupils resisted seeking advice or guidance about their futures from Connexions (or other ‘official’ sources). This placed them at a disadvantage because they lacked relevant knowledge, information and cultural capital about how to navigate the educational system and tended to lose out when it came to playing the aspirations ‘game’.

The impact of ‘wait and see’ was evident among those pupils who were tracked beyond Year 11. For example, Melissa had not applied to college during Year 11 because she did not expect to get good grades. She had not even considered that college might be an option until she brought her results home and her mum said to her “erm, are you going college or something?” and encouraged Melissa to apply. By this time, the course that she most wanted to do (childcare) was full in every one of her local colleges and she had to choose Media Studies instead. She confessed: “I *was* disappointed but now I don’t really mind cos I’m enjoying media and I made like loads of new friends, so you know, it’s fun”. Ben, from Hillside Park, had ambitions to be a mechanic and work at the airport. However, he failed to complete an application for an apprenticeship and ended up being advised to stay on in the 6<sup>th</sup> form and study Leisure and Tourism GNVQ.

### 6.3 Aspirations and Mobility: ‘Escape’ or staying put?

Whilst the young people expressed a range of occupational aspirations, they all expressed broadly similar views on their underlying desires and motivations for their futures. It was widely agreed that the most important thing would be the chance to get a “good job” that would provide “good money” or “a decent wage”. They aspired to being financially comfortable (although a couple of boys stated explicitly that they would like to be ‘rich’ – see also Archer *et al.*, 2005). This view was reiterated by parents, who were primarily concerned that their children should find a job and stay out of trouble. When asked whether she thought her son had any kind of hopes or dreams, Mike’s mum replied:

“I don’t know, it’s hard to say really. Just to earn money, he’s always been the same. He’ll find something, he’s that sort of child. He’ll get on in life and he’ll work hard, it will be good.” There is nothing specific she wants him to be: “As long as he’s happy and he’s not doing things he shouldn’t be doing, you know. He’s not going to be a brain surgeon or anything like that, [but] as long as he does alright”.

A couple of the higher achieving pupils at KS3 mentioned that they would value finding a job that they would enjoy or that would provide “room for improvement” (Jason). However, these pupils were in the minority.

‘I know so many people that have ended up in jobs they just hate. And, I really don’t wanna end up in a job that isn’t well paid - and I know I can’t be picky or anything about like money - but I don’t wanna end up in a job that I don’t enjoy doing. Even if it, actually even if it is like, really well paid, if I hated it, I wouldn’t – I - that would be the worst thing...’ (Jane).

Working in MacDonald’s was widely cited as the epitome of a ‘bad’ job, along with refuse collector and road sweeper – although several pupils also regarded a ‘boring office’ job as highly undesirable.

Alongside the widespread concern to earn a ‘decent wage’, a number of pupils also expressed clear aspirations for social mobility. For example, Analisa said that she wants to be “independent” when she “grows up”. She wants to earn “good money” and aspired to escape the hard and poorly paid working lives of her parents, who do “cleaning jobs and stuff”. Instead, Analisa aspired to a managerial position:

“... be like a manager of a small shop or something, or something in business [...] I want to be like a bank manager or something. Or something like John Lewis or something where I can be a department manager. As long as [...] I can get a nice house in a nice area I wouldn’t mind that”.

As part of her dream of escape, Analisa aspired to geographical mobility and to be able to move away from her local area, which she described as “dead end”. She felt that moving away would increase her chances of success:

“I just didn’t want to grow up, live in Fairwick, be on the dole [...] But if you keep growing up in Fairwick you are going to grow up with like not a good [chance]. But you know if you go to higher education and do something like maths, English and science and, lets say, work in the city and you don't live in such areas like Fairwick it will probably be better”.

As a Head of Year 11 explained, “a lot of them are trying to escape from that sort of background. They are trying to better themselves so that they can go on”. Analisa’s comments echo those of the white working class women discussed by Lawler (1999) and Skeggs (1997) and the ethnically diverse working class women in Archer & Leathwood (2003), who dream of ‘escape’ and ‘bettering themselves’ through education.

However, most young people felt a sense of ambivalence about the prospect of geographical mobility. Some expressed a clear desire to ‘stay local’ and ‘keep close’ (Pugsley 1998). For example, David wanted to stay living locally, even though he described his local area as “scummy”. Similarly, Jane said she would not like to move away and Tim emphasised “I wouldn't move away from my family and mates”. Lucy was adamant that she would not want to go far from her area and she would like to study, live and work in her local community, hopefully opening her own hairdressers. However, this desire to stay local could restrict a young person’s career options, and Max recounted how he was unable to find work as a lifeguard because there were no vacancies in any of the local leisure centres.

Melissa summed up the ambivalence she faced regarding balancing social and geographic mobility. She acknowledged that she will probably remain in her local area among her close, extended family- whom she valued greatly and who provided her with immense support (and – as noted elsewhere in the report- had prompted both her re-engagement with education and her application to further education). However, she also admitted that she sometimes dreams of moving away to another city or another country:

“but the thing is I don't wanna leave my friends and my cousins, like, you know? I’ll probably, I dunno - I wanna go somewhere but I wish they could come with me”.

## **6.4 Instrumental aspirations and pragmatic choices: ‘I’d rather work’**

During the first two phases of interviews, a substantial proportion of young people expressed the view that they would “rather work” and get a job as soon as they finished school at 16. This view was strongly gendered, being expressed by 47% of boys (N=14) and only 17% of girls (N= 4). For example, Max anticipated getting work as a lifeguard, Mike (Littleton) thought he could get a job painting and decorating and seven pupils imagined that they might be able to leave school and set up their own businesses (Nathan; Ben; Darrel; David (Littleton), James, Lacie and Verona).

There was considerable talk and anticipation among these young people about how they “can’t wait” to leave school and start work. As Ben said, “I can’t wait till I go and get my job that’s all”. This eagerness was evidenced in their suggestions that they would rather take a less preferred, or any, job in order to enter the labour market, rather than wait for their first choice job to materialise:

“I have always wanted to be an electrician but the locksmith’s job has come quicker than the electrician’s and so I will just take that” (James).

College was regarded as a less desirable, fall back position- as Max stated, he would not even consider college “if I had a job sitting there”. Although as Nathan noted, for many the option of college was still preferable to school sixth form – although both were seen as less desirable than going out to work:

“I don’t know, I would like to work more than I would want to go to college, but if I couldn’t go to work, I would go to college, but I wouldn’t go to 6th form” (Nathan).

“I don’t like school because I’d rather go to work and get paid for the work I’m doing” (Lee).

The desire to leave education emerged as strong motivating force underlying many pupils’ desire to enter the workforce:

“I don’t like learning a lot, I’d rather just go out and work” (Mark, Littleton).

“I don’t enjoy school I just can’t wait to get on [...] I don’t want anything to do with more education because I don’t like it” (Mark, Hillside Park).

“I would like to start to work- I don’t know about 6th Form because I really don’t like coming to school” (Leah).

“I’m sick of school. I don’t want to go university I won’t like it.... If I leave school, I’ll start work” (Robert).

Education was described as preventing young people from ‘getting on with life’ – as they felt that adult life would not really begin until they found work and were earning a wage. For example, Janine referred to employment as ‘the big open wide world’, adding “I’ve been at school so many years, and I just want- I want out of school, just get my life going”. Mark at Hillside Park agreed, saying “I just want to get out and do something”.

Whilst most parents said that they would prefer their children to continue in post-compulsory education (see also Section 6.6, below) John's mum said:

“Well I wouldn't like him to stay at home and do nothing, put it that way and so you know. And I know he'd like to be at work and earn money, you know what I mean? Cos John ain't a person to sit around and do nothing he wants to do things”.

Finding immediate employment was also framed as a financial necessity by some young people, as Mark (Littleton) said, “[I] have no money, so I have to have money, so I have to get a job”. Janine also described needing to earn some money before she could even contemplate a future career path (“once I've got myself sorted out”). She also seemed to apply the ‘wait and see’ approach to her future working life, suggesting that she would “experiment” with different jobs until she found something she liked:

“[I'm] quite looking forward to leaving school to get a new job and stuff [...] I'd like to experiment in one job but a different job to experiment in another and then, then I will actually find one job that I'm going to stick to, to do”.

In contrast, at the start of the project Jane expressed a more ‘middle class’ motivation for finding a job when she left school (although her views changed over the course of the project):

“I had my heart set on going travelling, like, as soon as I could and all I wanted to do was just save up and go travelling. And so I really just wanted to work as soon as I got out of school”.

Many staff also emphasised how financial pressures resulted in families encouraging their children to earn money as soon as possible. This was recognised this as a real predicament for poorer families, to the extent that post-compulsory education was only perceived as a viable option by families who felt that they could financially afford it. Understandably, the immediate financial needs of a family often took precedence over potential longer term financial benefits of continuing in education

“If you look at the index, things like free school meals you'll find that that, we've got very, very deprived pupils in terms of their socio-economic background because loads of them, well 90% or more are on free school meals and that's ... the kids as well. So what hope has a child like that got ... yeah, just get a qualification, GCSE ... qualification, say post 16 what

does the child do after that if a parent cannot fund education? Therefore, if their uncle runs a shop they, work in the shop” (Assistant Head).

“Many students at 16 want to get a job: they want money in their pockets and I don’t blame them for that but that’s what they see as really important is instant cash, rather than looking to the long term prospects and earning potential” (Head of Year 10).

“I really feel for children in this area: it’s financial. If you’ve got a one parent family you may have two or three other young kids – family need money- and I think a lot of these kids they should be out earning rather than going into education” (Head of Year 10).

“I think that there is a keenness in our students to earn money now rather than an awareness that in three or four years time they could be earning an awful lot more. But they and their families need it *now* [...] I think financial security is important to the families. I think if they feel secure that they can manage without that person bringing in money at 16 or 18 or whatever...” (Social Inclusion Manager).

By the time of the phase three interviews, however, many of the young people found that their plans to find work had not materialised. Among the ex-Year 11s, almost all had returned to either 6<sup>th</sup> form or FE college: Mark (Littleton) was doing GCSE re-takes; Ben was now taking a GNVQ in Leisure and Tourism and Germaine was in 6<sup>th</sup> form doing BTEC Sports. Janine, however, had left school and was now working on travelling fairgrounds with her family.

Among the ex-Year 10s, who were now entering Year 11, there was also evidence of a change of heart among some pupils. Mark (Hillside Park) now felt he would need to go to college to do a trade apprenticeship. This change in attitude stemmed mostly from pupils’ realisation that getting work would be harder than they previously thought or from a new realisation that additional qualifications would be required in order to get the job they wanted:

“No I have definitely got to go to college because everyone is always ‘oh yeah- get a job straightaway’ and that is what I used to want to do, I used to want to just get a job straightaway. I spoke to my brother and he said ‘just make sure you get into college at least like once a week, like get a job *and* college’ because otherwise I could never really get a profession or something. If I want to do electric’s or something I need to go to college”.

Of the new Year 11s, only Mike (Hillside Park) had a job lined up as a gas fitter, for when he planned to leave at the end of the year. This job offer had been obtained through the family’s social capital, and would be to work for a family friend.

The difficulty of actually finding a job at 16 was reiterated by one Deputy Head:

“Some go straight into employment - a small number through modern apprenticeships but more I think [go] straight into jobs, with rather - sadly often, I think - rather ridiculous hopes and dreams. There was a boy who was talking to us yesterday. He came back to us much quicker than I would have imagined actually. It is only five weeks into year 12. A boy who [...] gave up completely in year 11, wasn't interested, don't want to be here, want to get a job. He came and spoke to my colleagues yesterday. Really collapsed really and fell apart saying that 'I've messed my whole life up Sir what can I do?' You know and [previously] it's been lots of big talk about 'oh Sir I'm getting loads of money' and all this and in fact it's not true. And I fancy, one of the sadnesses probably for us is that there are probably a fair few kids out there [...] who are actually sitting at home watching the telly and they are too proud, or they think that we wouldn't have them back because they have annoyed us in the past or because we have not had a terribly smooth relationship. Now again I wouldn't want to paint this place as some Utopia. We, there are some we wouldn't welcome back. There are some who wouldn't want to come back here given all the tea in China but there are others who, I fear, are doing very little and it saddens me a bit because I think that those are the ones who are just sitting around dossing, they are trying to wait and find a way of getting some sort of benefit there..” (Deputy Head).

Similarly a Head of Year 11 described how some pupils boomerang back into education after encountering the realities of a world of insecure and low paid work:

“... sometimes they will take time out and go and do some work but [what] they usually find is -or what they've said to me is- that they, it's casual labour, it's not on the cards, it's not strictly legit. It's all cash in hand and obviously it's all low paid jobs. So that sometimes jolts them to the realisation that the real world is actually quite nasty out there and they need to do something about it if they want to progress”.

## **6.5 'High' Aspirations**

Contrary to popular assumptions, sixteen young people (30% of the sample) indicated at some point during their interviews that they held 'high' aspirations to professional careers. However, it was notable that each of these young people also held at least one other 'back up' plan in case their higher aspiration did not work out. Several of the pupils also aspired to more than one type of professional career (e.g. both Sarah and Melissa mentioned wanting to be both a lawyer and a doctor). Amongst the range of professional jobs that these young people aspired to, the most popular were lawyer/ solicitor (Jade, Jordan, Latoya, Charlene, Tyson, Steven, Sarah and Melissa); accountant (Jordan, Yesim, Analisa); doctor (Sarah, Melissa, Hapsa); architect (Nick, Jason) and teacher (Nadia; Michelle).

The motivation for young people to consider such jobs came from a variety of sources, including TV and personal experience. For example, Tyson described how his aspiration to

work in law was based on his own experience being helped by a solicitor when he got into trouble with the police.

These higher aspirations tended to be held along with a more 'realistic' or achievable 'plan B' - although girls were far more likely not only to have a fall-back idea, but to have a clearly 'achievable' plan B. In contrast, boys were more likely to either specify a single high aspiration or a fall-back option that would require a similar level of qualifications. For example: Jade (mixed ethnicity), Latoya (Black African) and Melissa (Turkish) all aspired to legal careers, but – in recognition of this as being a difficult goal – also said that they would be happy to work in a clothes shop, a beautician's or a hairdresser's.

The difficulty for these aspirant young women to imagine themselves out of their current contexts and to move beyond the 'known' was amply illustrated in the interviews. In particular, the young women tended to feel that their 'higher' dreams were unrealistic (or as Jane put it, "my goals are too far fetched") and unattainable in comparison to the familiar routes through hairdressing and beauty that they knew to be accessible and 'safer' options. Hence Jermina (Black African) said that she really wanted to be a nurse, but was also thinking about becoming a hairdresser because she worried that she would not get good enough grades to become a nurse. Kemisha (Black UK) had ambitions to work in health and social care, and was being encouraged by her family in this respect. Yet she also saw hairdressing as a more realistic and achievable option. Michelle (White UK) wanted to become a textiles teacher but saw this as 'impossible', whereas hair and beauty would provide a far safer and more realistic path. Likewise, Kay (White UK) loved the idea of working abroad as a travel representative, but said that she could not really imagine doing this job and had no idea of how to achieve it. Instead, she resigned herself to becoming a beautician, because 'I have more experience and I will know more how to do it'. Melissa underlined the distinction between her high aspiration to a professional career, and what she saw as the reality for someone in her position:

"Everyone wants to be a Lawyer or a Doctor [but] I don't think that is going to happen unless I have got A's and stuff like that".

As these extracts suggest, there appears to be a need for careers education to be undertaken with working class pupils to enable them to feel that a wider range of careers are realistically achievable. An important aspect of this would be providing the cultural capital required to enable them to plan and see a route ahead. Melissa's comment, above, also strikes a note for

policy-makers concerned with 'raising aspirations', as she suggests that of course young people like herself would want 'top' jobs – they just know there is no way that they themselves can achieve them in reality. The challenge thus remains in how to create a context within which they have an equal chance to succeed.

It was also evident that some of the young people's initial high expectations were subsequently curtailed and negatively impacted on by other people. In some cases, girls like Jane and Nadia were encouraged to lower their ambitions by parents who felt that they were setting their sights too high and feared failure. Jane's mum suggested to her that sixth form would not "suit" her and Nadia's father discouraged her from trying to become a lawyer:

"Because my mum- I was talking to my mum about it and she said, she like, she's really quite, like old fashioned with education... Mum has said she doesn't think 6th form will suit me and I will probably get a good job if I leave school but I'm not sure" (Jane).

"He said that it's going to be hard and he don't think I could do it" (Nadia).

Jane's and Nadia's extracts are reminiscent of the resistance that working class women in studies by Lawler (1999) and Archer et al (2003) experienced in relation to aspiring to go to higher education- where they were chastised and subject to disapproval for 'getting above your station'. But they also reflect parents wishing to protect their children from the disappointment of failure and the risks that stem from it.

Analisa (a young Black African woman) and a few other minority ethnic pupils also indicated that the school or related professional, had played a role in lowering their expectations and thwarting their attempts to imagine themselves into more aspirant and successful identities:

"Well I was talking to my maths teacher and I said 'yeah I'm going to LSE' and he goes 'yes if you get in there he will dance round this hall in woman's dress'... so there's no chance of me going to LSE" (Analisa).

Lucy's confidence and aspirations to 'be someone' had also been knocked by a member of staff who had told her "it ain't no point in you doing the rest of them subjects." This led Lucy to lose all hope and aspiration, feeling "there ain't no point. I ain't going to go nowhere."

## 6.6 Views of Post-compulsory education

A strong distinction emerged in the views of young people and their parents between further and higher education. On the whole, further education was regarded as a more valuable, attainable and realistic prospect, whereas higher education was mostly seen as unrealistic and unthinkable (although a handful of pupils did aspire to go).

### *Views of FE*

Over the course of the interviews, most of the young people came to the view that they would probably need to continue in further education- even if this had not been part of their original plan. This shift was prompted by a number of factors, including the realisation that it would be very difficult to find a job without additional qualifications, the lure of the EMA and the need to retake GCSEs that they had failed. In particular FE was valued as a means through which to pursue vocational courses that would lead into employment.

Whilst FE was widely regarded as relatively open and accessible, as noted in section on race/racism (4.3), some black girls worried that they might be prevented from getting into the 'better' FE colleges by class and racial prejudice. A number of pupils also seemed to lack of knowledge about what colleges are, how and when to apply for them and what to expect. Hence Yesim was unsure on the difference between a GCSE and NVQ and Melissa had not been aware of when she should apply to colleges and hence missed getting onto the course she wanted.

In contrast to the assumptions of many members of staff, most of the parents in the study wanted their children to continue onto further education. They particularly valued FE as an essential requirement for the children's ability to get jobs. For example, Babu's mum stressed that he must continue his education – in whatever subject a college would offer him a place in. She worried what he would do without education because she felt that "life is becoming more competitive". John's mum also explained: "well hopefully when he leaves this summer [...] he's going to carry on going to college" to do plumbing and painting and decorating.

Lee's mum was also keen for her son to return to education in order to help him to become a sports coach, and she described struggling to get Lee to realise that he would need qualifications in order to find work. As her extract illustrates, she feels that Lee is not aware

of the different need for qualifications today, as compared to her own generation. She and Lee's dad also used a classed discourse to try to encourage him to "not make the same mistakes as us" and to use education in order to try escape the struggle of "shitty jobs":

"I would rather he went back into education because to become a coach you have got to have them qualifications. If he don't get nothing when he comes out of school I would rather him go back to college or come to 6th form and get his education for his coaching. In Lee's eyes he can come out of school and walk into a job but as we all know he can't - he has got to have the right education. I have told him he is not leaving school if he has not got a job- he is coming back. He is not going to be like me. I left school at 15 and I have had no education at all. I hated school. But if I turned back the clocks now, I wished I would have stayed on and done everything. I said 'you are going to regret it Lee if you don't start putting your head down.' And even his dad tells him and his dad is dyslexic and he can't read and write properly and he says 'I don't want you to be like me.' He said 'well look at the money you have earned dad' and he said 'yeah but look at the shitty job I've got.' With me and him I think he will go back to school or college I really do. If he ain't got the education he ain't got a job to go to [...] It is important because it is his education. Nowadays to work in a shop you have got to have so many GCSEs I couldn't believe what I was reading. To work in a library as a library assistant you have got to have 3 GCSEs and that is just to work as a library assistant. And so what chance have the kids got of getting a job nowadays if they ain't got nothing behind them? They ain't got nothing".

Mike's mum, however, was more ambivalent, admitting "he's got no intentions of staying on [...] he's sort of said 'yeah, I'd like to go and get a job'. However, she also mentioned that he might still need to go into a college on a part-time basis "twice a week, probably to do Maths and English, I don't know."

In contrast to the mothers of the boys, Lacie's mum described how both she and Lacie wanted to stay on at school, but felt that they were being prevented from doing so. As Lacie's mum explained, "obviously I want her to stay on for another year and sort of better herself and then she's got more opportunity to do what she wants to do really". However, she felt that the school were preventing or discouraging Lacie from returning.

### *Staying on as a 'default' option*

As noted for the young people who originally wanted to leave and get jobs, in the end, staying on in education became a 'default' option for many of the old Year 11 pupils.

Int So what made you decide to stay on?

Jason I don't know, like all it was, was I didn't really have an idea of where I wanted to go anyway, and I just started

This pattern was also noticed among staff

"I think the lower achievers, so the GNVQ students, don't really know what else to do with themselves and they, as a group, tend to stay on to sixth form" (Head of Year 11).

For parents, the value that they attached to post-compulsory education was motivated more through a realisation that jobs are difficult to get and their fear of their children 'doing nothing' and losing them to 'the street', as opposed to an intrinsic valuing of post-compulsory qualifications. For example, Lacie's mum suggested "I want her to be doing what she wants to do, which she's interested in beauty, so I want her to get on and do that rather than sort of hang about on the streets basically". Similarly, Lee's mum explained:

"I have not got a clue but as I said to Lee- if he ain't got a job then he is staying on at school or he is going to college, because he is not going to be one of these kids that run around on the street, no way: over my dead body." [...] I wouldn't mind [if he drove a cab] because he would never be skint, he would never, ever be skint...He would always have money in his pocket. But that is what worries me because I think if ain't got a job if he is on the streets he is going to go into a junkie he is going to mix with all the wrong crowd and either get nicked or go on drugs. And no way is he having that- he don't smoke now, he don't drink...well I hope he doesn't. Well, I know he don't smoke because he can't stand me smoking. He don't drink and I don't think he would ever have the heart to touch drugs. But if comes out of school and dosses on the streets: that is how it all starts. And I think he has got his head screwed on for the rugby and the coaching lark".

Staff were also aware of that 'fear of the dole' underpinned much family support for pupils to further education:

"So you know, that trend will trickle through and you know, we will find a lot more young people staying on in education. [Int: Why do you think it scares them?...] I think it's the thought that if they haven't got their GCSEs because obviously there's perhaps a higher percentage that perhaps don't achieve their GCSEs in the schools, and I think they're fearful what's going to happen to them and they don't want to be on the dole. There's that big thing around being on the dole at 16, you know, that sort of demoralising, that they don't perhaps want but sometimes that's the route that some young people take" (Connexions Advisor).

"The kids want to attain they want to go to further. They don't [want to] end up in dead end jobs. They really want to go into further and higher education. Okay we've got the element that will never go that far, but [even they] will be doing, even now like vocational college courses to give them a route through, rather than leaving the school with nothing to do afterwards" (Head of Year 10).

As the Head of Year 10 at Cowick also astutely noticed, the current policy context also makes it difficult for young people not to stay in education- as alternative forms of support have been withdrawn.

"I think you have to bear in mind that things are changing and that it is very difficult for people *not* to carry on now...Well it is because there is nothing for them to do because there are very few employers now that will take on a 16 year old and the push and the drive is for

them to carry on and they sort of try to give them an incentive. I don't know how much they give them but I think they give money or something, like. I know that they are making it harder for 16 year olds... I am sure parents are affected as well because I don't think they actually qualify for benefits. I am not quite sure I would have to double check but I think it is actually quite difficult for them not to be in further education". (Head of Year 10).

### *Views of Higher Education*

The majority of young people said that they had never really thought about higher education, although a small number of pupils did aspire to go to university. Those pupils who did value higher education, predominantly framed it as worth the investment due to the potential for higher future earnings. Nadira was critical of her friends who did not share this view with her:

"A few of them are not concentrating they think at the end of the day they can get a job, like leave school and they can get a job. They don't realise that they are going to go and do retail for instance and if I get my degree I will like be earning double what they get, for less hours. And I tell them stuff like that but some of them just don't click on. Some of them are well motivated - I don't have to say anything, they say 'do it to me'. Certain ones just need to wake up a bit".

However, whether this idea took hold, or melted away, over the course of the interviews very much depended on the context that pupils found themselves in. Analisa received targeted support from the school, which helped to consolidate her initial, tentative thoughts about HE and provided her with the practical support, experience and knowledge with which to make 'good' choices and render university a thinkable possibility. Analisa came to see higher education as a route towards social mobility and becoming more 'middle class'

"I think university education is good and it gives a clearer way to know what you want to do with your life and you can see like your future job, know what you want to do and stuff".

However, in her earlier interviews she lacked any knowledge on what it might entail and how to get there – for example regarding what university life is like, what a degree means, and what sort of job she might get with a degree. She was lucky enough to be put forward by the school for an Aim Higher summer school and went for a week long visit, which she found "good...interesting" but also "kind of hard, the lectures were kind of boring, but apart from that it was alright. We got free food as well". By phase 3 she was having discussions about what A levels she would need to take and which degree she might later apply for – and she was looking forward to the potential social mobility that she might obtain from the degree:

"I think in a way if you to go Uni. you get more respect if you have a degree and stuff like just wanting a proper career knowing that I have got my degree and I can get a job. And so probably just what comes out of it".

In contrast, Jane suggested in her phase 1 interview, “I would like to, like experience something new and exciting, like university”, although she was also “worried that it won’t always be a back up”. But by phase 2 she was saying “I’m not too keen on going to university” because she seemed to have lost confidence in her abilities and was “freaking out” with the “pressure”- although she dressed this up saying that she felt she was just ‘too lazy’:

“... knowing myself, it sounds awful but, knowing myself I probably would give up or I couldn’t be bothered, cos like I’m like my brother, I’m lazy. I just I don’t want to - I don’t want to get myself into something and then be stuck. [...] I don’t think many people like no one, you know, putting people under new pressure and you start freaking out, oh gosh what am I going to be?”

Whilst Jane dreamed of going to university to study English and become a journalist, she worried that she would not make it and that her years spent trying would therefore not be a dangerous investment. As noted in section 4.2, her boyfriend Dave had similar concerns and by phase 3, the couple were both thinking that they would ‘play safe’ and remain together locally.

For most pupils university was an ‘unthinkable’ option- and one that they had not previously considered. Indeed, it was a ‘non-choice’ in many respects (see Archer et al., 2003). Very few pupils knew much about university which was perhaps unsurprising given that few had family histories of HE participation. But, even among those young people who expressed an interest to go, some could not even name a single university. This lack of knowledge about HE placed it outside of most young people’s horizons of choice – an issue that was picked up on by a number of staff, and which they felt they had to “battle against”:

“... but predominantly in this area there’s not perhaps a need for kids naturally thinking of going off to university... it’s not within their, perhaps family and the expectation in their family that they should, that university or further education is going to be necessarily a good thing and so there is a bit of a battle in that respect.” (Head of Year 10).

“[there are] lots of parents who have never been to university, so it’s about changing that mindset.” (Head of Year 11).

Without extra encouragement and support it was difficult for young people and their families to be able to conceive of university as a realistic or even viable option. The middle class academic habitus of higher education also rendered it an undesirable and unattractive option to many young people, who saw HE as “not for me”. The young people explained their resistance to higher education in terms of the classed ethos and image of university (it is for

“posh” people), the academic nature of higher education study (it is only for “smart” and “brainy” people), the length of degree courses (“too long”) and financial reasons (that it is unaffordable).

Of these, one of the most powerful discourses that young people voiced against HE participation was that university is a “big, posh” place (Kemisha) where they would not “belong”. As one Year 10 girl said in a discussion group, “it seems good, but it’s not for me”. Similarly Roger stated “I just can’t see myself there” and Ben was adamant “I don’t want to go to university [...] cos I don’t reckon I’d fit in there.” The universities that young people were most aware of were the old, elite institutions, such as Oxford and Cambridge. A few pupils also had a notion of there being a hierarchy of institutions (“there’s high universities and lower universities”). Among these pupils, the identification of universities as ‘posh places’ was particularly strong, as they associated ‘higher’ universities as for “posh” people- whereas the ‘lower’ universities “they let everyone and anyone in there”.

Oxbridge universities in particular were described as “far beyond my reach” and/or alien places where they would not belong. This view was expressed even among pupils who had been on open days to these (and other) institutions. As Dylan put it, “because there’s a certain type of people that would be there”:

“Oxford and Cambridge are posh schools, they’ve got like the Royal family and stuff. They are quite upper class... they don’t have much street language”. (Dylan, Black Caribbean boy, Year 10, Littleton).

The association between post-compulsory education and ‘poshness’ was reiterated by Bob, who described how he was only now considering going to an (inner city) FE college because he had been reassured that “the people ain’t all stuck up”:

“my mate’s sister’s boyfriend has been there [...] Yeah, he said that it’s quite good. It ain’t as bad as it looks [Int Why, how does it look?] No it looks all right but it’s just the people, that’s what he’s trying to put across, the people ain’t all stuck up”.

Another key reason why pupils saw university as unattainable was because of the academic ethos - or as Amanda said, “university is too hard”. HE was seen as the preserve of “smart” and “brainy” people- a description that the young people felt did not apply to themselves. Darren admitted, “[I] never thought I’d be able to get in there”, and Bob felt it was:

“just a load of boff jobs [...] they’re just all smart and just all clever [Int: And how is that compared to you?] I dunno. Just non-smart”.

Many young people felt the same, and their remarks convey a sense of fragile learner identities and a lack of confidence in their learning ability:

“Because you have to be brainy to go there and I am not” (Lacie).

“I thought once about going but I don't know I just want to get out and do something. “I don't want anything to do with more education because I don't like it” (Mark, Littleton).

John’s and Lee’s mothers also saw HE as unrealistic for their sons for similar reasons:

“No...I don't think he’s brainy enough! (Laughs)” (John's mum).

“No, definitely a no, no...It's not him. He is moaning about I’m making him stay on at college or stay on at school he is moaning about that and so imagine him going to like university until he is like 21 or 22 no!” (Lee's mum).

For some young people, university was also regarded as ‘too long’ and ‘too far ahead’.

“Cos when I finish college I want to just go to work innit? Cos university you have to spend a long time innit, so when I leave college I want to go to work.” “University: that’s long...” (Germaine).

And Michelle explained how it was out of the question “because it’s far away from the family and friends”.

A number of the young people had been on widening participation initiatives, such as visits to universities and these events had generated a range of positive views about HE. However, they still did not really overcome the young people’s feeling that university was not an option for them personally. For example, Tyson was impressed by the visit he had been on because “like it was just like a whole new life. I liked what I saw”. And yet he was still “unsure” whether he personally would go. Darren similarly described how he was “impressed”, particularly by the social facilities like the bar and clubs/societies (which he had not expected to be there), but again this did not increase his expectations of going.

The other key barrier to HE participation was identified as that of debt and money. This impacted even on the most committed of the young people, as Analisa described being worried about “not having enough money for the student loan thing”. Like others, she argued “I think university should be free”.

Jordan was also put off by the prospect of student debt and did not see university as a viable option or one that fitted with her sense of identity and lifestyle (see section 4.6) She felt, however, that if the loans and fees were abolished “it would be a choice for a lot more people like me”.

“I have to have a job that brings in a decent wage ... I’d need money behind me so if I weren’t able to work part-time and earn the money I needed I would quit full time school”.

Other young people also felt strongly that loans and fees prevented people like themselves from being able to conceive of HE as a realistic option. As one boy in a Year 11 focus group put it, “the money that you owe back at the end is a really big con”. Pupils also explained that they had various commitments to help with their household finances, and would find it difficult to still ‘chip in’ for bills and contribute to the family wage if they were studying. The risk of undertaking a degree was, in some cases, simply judged to be too great. As one boy in the group said, at the end a degree, he would be “in the same position as the guy who has been shovelling chips for the last 2 years and only I’ve got this big fat debt”.

Information about student finance was picked up through interpersonal contacts, and Jason admitted that whilst he did not know much in general about universities, he had heard worrying things about student debt:

“I’ve heard negativity about them. The fees keep going up and up. But what I’ve heard is [...] I go to this place on Saturday, a Leisure Centre place, and the guy is always talking about his kids and where they are going to university, they have to pay £3000 next year and I think when I go, how much money is it going to be and I think how am I going to have to pay”.

These concerns seemed to impact on Jason’s motivation to go to university- as he ‘hoped’ to go in his phase 1 and 2 interviews, but was only a ‘maybe’ by his final interview, in which he stated he was taking it ‘one step at a time’ because “people talk about loans and stuff and being in debt later on in life. I don’t want to be finishing a course and then still paying for it 5 or 6 years later”. Of the study sample, Jason was one of the pupils who achieved amongst the highest scores at KS3 and hence might be considered as a potential future HE applicant. However, his confidence seemed to decline over the course of the project and, as noted previously, he ended up underachieving at GCSE. This begs the question of whether earlier intervention might have helped to keep him ‘on track’.

## **6.7 The gendered and classed nature of aspirations- ‘hot knowledge’, cultural capital and habitus**

The young people’s aspirations were clearly grounded within, and shaped by, their gender and social class. Their social class and gender inflected the types and sources of information that they drew on to construct their aspirations and inform their post-16 choices. Their classed, gendered habitus’ also shaped their horizons of choice and what they considered to be ‘normal’ for ‘people like me’.

In line with the findings of Ball and Vincent (1998), young working class people based their ideas and choices on ‘hot knowledge’ - information that they gained through interpersonal contacts and local grapevines. They were heavily influenced by their own experiences and the experiences of family, friends and people in their local communities. Hence their aspirations were heavily skewed towards the ‘known’. For example, Dan at Riverway explained how he wanted to join the army “since I was little and I’ve seen them on TV and that, and my granddad and my uncle have been talking about it”. Similarly, Leah wants to work with children and is influenced by her sister who works in a nursery. Lee considered being a black cab driver like his dad and Lucy wanted to be hairdresser because she has a hairdresser who comes to her house and ‘looks like she makes quite a bit money’. Choices and aspirations were influenced more by discussions with family members than with official careers advisors (e.g. “I’m just talking to a lot of people about-, you know, family members- about what they would, like, think is good”, Nadira). As Lacie explained, she wanted to be a beautician because

“My step-mum does her own nails and it looks good and my aunt and that have moved to Spain and they have a salon, so I thought if I become a beautician I can go and work for them”.

Another boy wanted to get a job through his brother: “My brother got the job from his work experience and worked there every Saturday and he started his apprenticeship, yeah, at Land Rover”. The social capital generated through family contacts and networks provided the young people with a range of ‘safe’ (possible and achievable) routes into paid employment. It

provided them with essential cultural capital, knowledge and information about different routes and jobs and could also give them practical experience:

“My auntie is a nurse and when she comes home every night like I ask her about some stuff, like how is it-the job is great, she likes it” (Jermina).

“My dad’s mate’s got a sun bed and nail shop over the road and I might be going in there for a couple of days...” (Lacie).

For the majority of young people, this preference for (and reliance upon) the ‘known’ resulted in them following stereotypically gendered and classed pathways. As Nathan said, “the girls all do like hair and beauty and catering and the boys do more maintenance and stuff like that.’ 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 example, several of the young women explained the motivation for their aspirations in terms of helping others. Jade said she wanted to work in a nursery so that she might be able to help children:

“I just think that I could help them and teach them what to do [...]. Like the way of growing up now is just, too much people know of me and like to *use* me in ways as if, like if something’s going on they use my name cos they know I won’t say nothing. But if I could go in a nursery and teach them, ‘if you get involved, you should know what to say’ and stuff like that”.

Hapsa says “I want to be a good person... who can help the people” and Natalie wanted to be a primary school teacher or a nurse because

“I want to help people and so that’s why I want to be a nurse because that makes quite a difference and like, at least you could say you’d done something with your life and with the children, I just like working with children, I think they’re quite sweet and so...”

For the girls who want 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. For example, Jermina often wore very elaborate hairstyles that took talent and dedication to create. She explained, “I want to be a hairdresser. I always do my own hair by myself”. Kay also wanted to do hair and beauty based on her own knowledge and experience and Kemisha added. “I like doing hair and stuff like that: I’m interested”. Lacie similarly said “I want to design clothes and be a beautician”.

Equally, boys’ interests in “practical” jobs and manual trades reflected popular discourses around working class masculinities (see Archer , Pratt & Phillips, 2001). In addition, some boys dreamt of the ‘ultimate’ masculine job, namely being a professional footballer. Max was

going to trials to try to get selected for a football team and dreamt of making “big money” as a professional footballer (“I don’t know... to the Premiership (*smiles*)”). His back up plan also revolved around football:

“I definitely am gonna play for a football team. I’m gonna go like to non-league or something and play there, and then you can have a part-time job still as well, and like get paid £500 a week or something from football and then have a little part-time job or something like that. Definitely gonna play football”.

For a few pupils, however, their everyday experiences and ‘hot knowledge’ had provided them with non-traditional aspirations. For instance, in her first interview Jane said that she wanted to become a mechanic because her dad was one and she was interested in working at Citroen because her uncle works there (although as noted in section 4.2, this did not last).

“I went through a phase where I had like loads of stuff in common with my Dad, like fishing and cars, and I was really tomboy but I don’t know, I don’t know”.

Interestingly, however, no boys aspired to traditionally ‘feminine’ jobs and none wanted to work in the care sector or the hair and beauty industry. Indeed, boys were sometimes highly derisory about the hair and beauty courses, and laughingly called them “hair and booty”. The reasons for these strong feelings were underpinned by homophobic discourses (as Lloyd said in a group interview, “because only poufs do it [...] I’m homophobic. I don’t like em. They’ll get beat up”), which as various sociologists have noted, are strongly implicated in the construction of hegemonic masculinities (e.g. Connel 1989). However, most boys did feel that catering was a vaguely acceptable course for boys to be doing because “you get a lot of geezers being top chefs you know, so that isn’t bad”<sup>4</sup>.

Whilst the young people clearly valued the hot knowledge that they gained from their family and friends, staff tended to worry that limited horizons within local communities effectively stifled young people’s aspirations. Indeed, some advisors struggled to understand why young people were so influenced by those around them, rather than the more ‘objective’ benefits presented to them through other sources:

“I think with young people, they all talk to each other and that’s the thing. They can be easily influenced by sometimes what their friends are doing, or sometimes by what their parents tell them to do, so you know, the influences are all around them in term of the decisions that they make” (Connexions Advisor).

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<sup>4</sup> Various young people mentioned the young TV celebrity chef Jamie Oliver as influencing their aspiration to be a chef.

However, as Ball and Vincent (1998) note, working class families tend to favour 'hot' over 'cold' (official) knowledge because the former is trusted as more reliable and impartial and more likely to be 'in our interests' than the formal ('cold') knowledge of the middle class educational system. Furthermore, if the risks and costs of HE participation are not addressed, it can be impossible and unfeasible for young working class people to think 'beyond' the boundaries of the safe and known.

## **6.8 Summary of issues affecting aspirations**

This section has attempted to discuss the complexity of young people's aspirations and to demonstrate that there is no simple linear route between aspirations and post-16 routes. As the data has illustrated, young people's aspirations are closely bound up with their identities and are shaped by their social class and gender locations. Moreover, aspirations might usefully be understood as interwoven with wider social structures – i.e. they are not simply a matter of personal preference or individual cognition. Rather, they can be both shaped, strengthened, weakened or curtailed by a range of factors that are external to the young person in question.

This has various implications for current policy initiatives that take an individualistic approach and focus on trying to 'raise' young people's aspirations as a tool for increasing engagement and post-16 participation. Such approaches might more usefully consider how to also address the multitude of external factors and structures of identity and inequality that resist and work against any 'broadening' or 'raising' of aspirations. In particular, it may be fruitful to consider the broader contexts within which 'aspiration-raising' takes place. For instance, inner city, working class young people are disproportionately subject to risk. As Beck (1991) notes, risk adheres to class structures- with working class communities experiencing an abundance of risk whereas the middle classes are able to purchase more safety and protection from risk. Furthermore, the costs of post-compulsory educational participation (but particularly HE participation) are disproportionately high for working class families. Hence the economic investment required to keep a young person in full or part-time education can be difficult for less affluent families to afford, particularly when a young person's wage is important for family financial survival. It is also suggested that more

sensitive and specific initiatives that can address intricate issues around identity will be needed if we are to support young people to realistically hold 'higher' aspirations.

Given the inequalities and difficulties faced by many families, young people and parents placed considerable emphasis on the importance of getting appropriate help and support from outside the family, as well as within it. This can be understood as particularly crucial given that many families possessed little formal knowledge or understanding of the education system and were at a disadvantage when it came to trying to decipher the maze of post-16 options. If young people are to be able to realistically aspire beyond the 'known', change will be required at a social structural (not just individual) level. As Lee's mum worried:

"I don't know, I hope to God all his dreams come true: it would make my day for his dreams to come true. But he has just got to have the right person at the right time watching him for his dreams to come true. But if not, I will stick by him whatever he wants to do".

## **SECTION 7**

### **THE IMPACT OF POLICIES AIMED AT INCREASING PARTICIPATION**

Participants in the study were asked about their views and experiences of various policies aimed at increasing participation among young working class/ inner city pupils. 7.1 considers young people's views and use of the Connexions service. Perceptions of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) are discussed in 7.2 and vocational college release courses are covered in 7.3. Views and experiences of Learning Mentors are addressed in 7.4. Section 7.5 details how respondents felt more generally about the government's widening participation agenda and views on Citizenship education are covered in 7.6.

#### **7.1 Connexions**

Overall, 22 out of the 53 young people (9 girls and 13 boys) made some use of Connexions over the course of the two-year project. In total, 31 young people did not make any use of Connexions— although most pupils said they had some sort of (vague) awareness of the service. Some young people gained advice instead from other sources, like subject teachers or from careers classes, vocational lessons or learning mentors (see section 7.4).

Connexions advisors visited all of the six schools. In addition, schools often had teachers with designated responsibilities for careers advice (Blackwell Street) or careers advice provided through PSE lessons and designated careers advisor/s (Cowick; Littleton, Eastleigh Central). Some young people made use of Connexions out of school, for example one of Helal's teachers took her to a Connexions centre to look at jobs advertised and to work on her CV. Mark also got an appointment to see a Connexions advisor through his local youth club. In phase three, a few pupils went to their local Connexions centre after they had got their GCSE results and left school. Stephen's Connexions centre helped him find a college course and Melissa visited her local centre when trying to find a job, although she ended up starting college instead:

“Oh I saw them erm, about, before I started college, like a few days before I started college. I went there and cos I wanted to look for a job and like they helped me with my CV. And I had to like do it more cos I only did a bit of it and I had to print so many of them out”.

The type and amount of contact that the young people experienced with Connexions varied across the schools and from pupil to pupil. Some had individual interviews and others only experienced group work. Some were one-off encounters whereas other pupils enjoyed repeated contact with personal advisors. They also came into contact with the service both via self-referral and being referred.

### **Views of young people who had used Connexions**

The 22 young people who used Connexions over the course of the project expressed a range of both positive and negative views about their experiences of the service.

Eight of the 22 young people who had used the service felt that their experience of Connexions had been positive and they identified two main factors: positive relationships with personal advisors and having received useful advice. A third factor (the pleasant ethos of Connexions centres) was suggested only by one pupil (Melissa).

In terms of the first factor, Darren, James and Max (all at Littleton) described experiencing very positive relations with their Connexions personal advisor (PA). Darren explained how he had developed a good relationship with his PA, with whom he had continued to keep in contact after he left the school. He was also pleased that his advisor regularly checks up on him. In addition to persuading and helping him onto a GNVQ course (“well my PA decided it was the best thing to do really”), Darren talked about particularly enjoyed the trips that his advisor organised, e.g. to the Science Museum and on residential courses during the school holiday. He was obviously pleased and engaged with the service, which seemed to be helped further by a local connection between the service and his estate (“it was good. I know lots of people from Connexions. A person on my estate works for Connexions”).

James and Max also talked about how they were hoping to do a long bicycle ride with their Connexions advisor (“me and my mate we got the same man that comes to speak to us all the time. In a few weeks we are going to go from London to Brighton on our pedal bikes”, Max).

A number of teachers also complimented the Connexions advisors in their schools and their ability to build positive relationships with pupils:

“I think what [name] does, personally I think is great. We had a Connexions person before him and he was absolutely rubbish to be honest. I just thought he didn't relate to the kids and whatever. Because [name] is young and he relates to a large majority of the students so I think in that way it's is very important because a lot of them can relate to him as well” (Learning Mentor).

Similarly, a Deputy Head explained:

“You get some of the more challenging children actually who have quite a strong relationship with the personal advisor and I think it is because she is more than just a career's advisor. She is- as Connexions tends to be- more than that and she does give them some advice, you know, for life in general and she does, she can also, you know, give them contact with other support groups and things”.

Another Head of Year 11 was similarly full of praise for the service:

“Connexions- certainly the people we've got coming in- are really good and they spend a great deal of time with the students. There's some good advice comes out”.

Four other young people said that they had received *useful advice* from Connexions. Bob (Riverway) , Sarah and Steven (Eastleigh Central) and Charlene (Cowick) felt that the service had been of help to them. For example, Bob said that even a single video screening by Connexions had given him some direction:

“It was useful. It was just like they came in for one day and they just showed you a video about apprenticeship with all the different companies and it looked quite good to me so I thought OK, I might do an apprenticeship”.

Charlene also found that the 'books and leaflets' provided were useful in giving her with an understanding of what qualifications she might need:

“Yes it was helpful because they had like the books and the leaflets and they will tell you everything about law and what qualifications, how many GCSE grades and needs for you to be qualified for to be accepted regarding college”.

Lacie experienced her Connexions interview at the beginning of Year 10 as “really useful actually” because it had provided her with information about hair and beauty courses at college. Nadira also found Connexions useful because they managed to place her in a short term course run by a local university: “they have put me into some course thing and some people do other stuff as well. And so that helps you because they tell you stuff about GCSEs and the future and how to get to where you want”.

David (Hillside Park) felt that Connexions had been pivotal in facilitating his return to school following an earlier exclusion, and described thankfully how his advisor “got me back into school”. He continued to see his PA regularly, who was helpful again when he came to leave school by securing him an EMA and a place at college. David felt genuinely grateful to the service for the support it had given him and credited his continued educational engagement to Connexions:

“Yes, if it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t have gone back to school and I wouldn’t be at college”.

Nadia’s aspirations were raised (to aspire to go to university) by an interview she had with a Connexions advisor:

“I know there’s some lady that she works on [...] Connexions, that talks to us sometimes and she told me that I should go to university, that would be the best and then do a degree”.

Connexions PAs also provided practical help and assistance to pupils after their GCSEs to help in their transitions, for example assisting them to access EMAs and college courses. This assistance was strongly valued by the young people, who felt otherwise alone as they found themselves for the first time outside a formal educational setting. For example, Tyson visited his local Connexions centre after he received his GCSE results, on the encouragement of his older sister:

“Yeah, they just said, they phoned a few colleges for me and they got me an application form and they found out if they had the courses I had. And then they found out [...] Community College had the courses I had, which was quite- very late, this was coming to the end of the summer and I hadn’t even sorted it out yet”.

One other positive view about the Connexions service was voiced by Melissa, who praised the ethos and facilities in her local centre. Whilst she had initially been resistant to visiting Connexions (see below), she was impressed when she visited with a friend and this seemed to encourage her to later use the service after she left school:

“Everyone was helpful and the computers, you could just go and, ...proper work places like an office...and they tell you what to say in a nice manner and that kind of stuff so it is pretty... and food is cheap there as well. You can get a sandwich, Coke and chocolate and crisps for like £1.30 or £1. Really good”.

Of course not all young people’s experiences of Connexions were positive and there were a range of **negative views** expressed about the service. These negative reflections included: not receiving enough advice/ help, finding the service too educationally directive; negative relations with PAs and finding the self-referral method problematic.

Tyson (Littleton), Mark (Hillside Park) and Analisa (Cowick) all felt that Connexions had provided *insufficient information, help or advice*. For example, Analisa complained that:

“They tell you nothing really”, adding “ if you are asking me if I am getting help like knowing what to do then no, I am not getting any help, I just have to choose what I want to do [...] No they don't give us any advice. You don't get any advice to see what you want to do and stuff”.

Tyson also felt that he hadn't been provided with a full picture of what his different options might be (“I would have liked to just show me my options which they weren't telling me, like what options I had if I didn't get the grades”).

This was also reflected in the comments of one learning mentor, who agreed that students needed to be shown a wider picture that included routes of how ‘failure’ might be navigated (and that success could be possible through different routes):

“Yeah, possibilities like a diagram - if you fail, there's this route, it takes longer but you still reach whatever. But if you do get your grades you're going this route which will take you -. Yeah, I think they just give them the information, okay you're interested in sports, okay you can do, for example, A Level PE but you need this and that and obviously that kid doesn't have them and he wants to go to university”.

One head of year also expressed concerns:

‘I don't know how effective they are. I don't really know how much careers guidance the students get... I was speaking to a couple of sixth formers last week and they felt disappointed with the careers guidance that they got for last year”.

Mark expressed some bitterness about the low level of contact that he received, and complained that the advice he received was not really useful because it was solely directed towards encouraging progression into further education:

“Yeah we do get people coming in but they don't talk to you as much as what you really want to know [...] they come in like say every about 5 months but you only get to see them for like once a year you don't see them every time they come in [...] I spoke to her before and there is nothing that she can tell me that I don't already know from when I spoke to other people. I think it is pointless just going to speak to her when she is just going to tell me things I already know. All she is going to do is point out different colleges that I can find out anyway. I don't know what she would do”.

Indeed, a few young people complained that Connexions is *too educationally directive* and that Connexions advisers only focus on directing young people into further education. As Bob put it, “college courses are normally mentioned. That's just it really, just college courses and apprenticeships”.

Whilst many pupils enjoyed positive relations with their PA, a few experienced negative relations with advisors. Jason, for instance said that the advisors he had seen “they don’t really help, they wind me up”. The source of frustration seemed to stem from pupils feeling that advisors were not listening (or did not agree) with what the pupil wanted to do:

“Everything I wanted to do they put me off doing that. So I got sort of, I stopped speaking to them after a while, like” (Jason).

Among those who had **not used Connexions**, a range of reasons were given for why they were not engaging with the service. Some said that they were dissuaded because they had heard *negative reports* from others about Connexions. For instance, Peter (Littleton) said:

“Coz like, I don’t really know- I don’t really wanna spend time with Connexions. Like I got family that goes to Connexions and they say like, it’s not, like it’s not really all that. It’s just, rubbish, basically. Just gonna be straight, they say it’s rubbish. I don’t know, I’m not gonna go”.

Pupils like Jordan (Blackwell Street) and Mark (Littleton) also argued that they did not want outside help and would rather ‘do it on my own’:

“I’m just happy sitting back doing what I’ve got to do to see if I can get there myself without any help” (Jordan).

“I don’t know, I just can’t be bothered personally. I’ll get my own job.” (Mark).

Several young people indicated that there was a *negative image* or stigma associated with using Connexions, as Robert put it:

“I just don’t like them kind of things [...] they talk to you as if...like...you’re a bit...you’re not like everyone else, you need extra help or whatever”.

This social stigma was picked up on as an issue by a Head of Year 11, who commented that it could also prevent self-referral among the most in need:

“[The] Connections brief has changed and their focus is more on children who have statements, children who are EAL. So some of these kids, some of these at risk are even more at risk because they’re going to fall through the net or if they’re singled out they’re going to think well, ‘why are we being singled out? Why isn’t everybody getting this? Why, why, why are you focussing on me?’. So they are the kind of people who are unlikely to independently look for careers advice, they are the kind of people who will need it foisted on them, for their own good”.

Connexions advisors agreed that the image of Connexions (particularly its focus on the most ‘needy’ pupils and those with personal problems) could be problematic (“they’re the ones we tend to miss out on, if they feel we don’t need Connexions because the image”, Connexions Advisor).

In line with Ball & Vincent's (1998) theory of working class preference for 'hot' knowledge, several young people suggested that they would prefer their help and advice to come from a different, *familiar source*. For example, Nathan (Hillside Park) was aware of the Connexions service, but had not used it because he preferred to get advice from a known and trusted subject teacher. Indeed, Hapsa, Amanda, John and Mark all talked about the help that they received from teachers at school. Melissa, on the other hand, relied on her family due to strained relations with teachers at school:

“Like the teachers put me down a lot but then I asked my brothers my older cousins and that they're, you know, I asked them and they're like, oh you know, they phoned up places and got application forms. My cousins and my brothers they helped me a lot”.

One of the heads of year agreed that many students would rather go to a familiar, trusted teacher than an unknown personal advisor in the first instance.

“Yeah, it's more the relationship is there. The relationship is not there with Connexions as an agency and it should be - or it would be helpful if it is”.

Echoing the complaints of some of the students who had used Connexions, some pupils indicated that they did not want to use the service because they were worried that it would be *too directive*. For example, Kemisha explained that she did not want to seek advice from Connexions because she was concerned that they would try and make her change her mind and that she does not like talking to people about what she wants to do.

A few pupils seemed to find the *part-time presence* of Connexions Advisors in schools and the *self-referral model* as problematic. Lee complained “they have got people who work in the school they are supposed to come and see us but they don't”. The notion of whether the service comes to the pupil, or the pupil goes to the service, recurred in a few accounts. As in the case of Lee, it could be difficult to establish an initial meeting between pupils with high rates of absenteeism and advisors who were not in the school everyday (“I was supposed to speak to someone but I weren't in on that day and so I missed that”, Lee).

These criticisms were also echoed by some staff, who pointed to the difficulties arising when advisors are not in school everyday and are not always accessible. For example, a Head of Year 11 commented that:

“The experience that I've had is that sometimes they need to actually, especially with the more difficult students, actually take them to places and not just give information. They're

not going to go, you know, you tend to like work that out after working a year that you actually have to do a lot of footwork to get any success with students because they just haven't got the self confidence or self belief or self esteem to go and do it themselves."

Pupils who did not use the service also indicated that they were not just resisting it, but were simply *deferring* the matter and agreed that the Connexions service might be useful in the future. As Jane said in her phase three interview, "I just haven't really got round to thinking about it yet. I probably will do soon, Dave [boyfriend] told me to go a careers advisor and that...". Likewise Peter admitted, "I haven't really tried. But I could I suppose". This lack of enthusiasm appeared to be underpinned both by reservations about the service and by the young people's more general strategy of 'wait and see' in relation to the formation of ideas about their post-16 progression.

Parents also seemed unsure of what support (if any) their children had experienced to date. They also tended to defer their own involvement, saying that they would wait until their child asks for their help, so as not to be seen to be putting undue pressure on their child, especially where their son or daughter seemed unsure of what they might like to do in the future:

"As far as I know I am not 100% sure. [Int: Do you think you would want some more sort of careers advice for him from the school or from other sources?] No, if he don't want to do what I want him to do I won't push him. But if he wants me to go and look with him and help him with his coaching, like, if he said 'mum can you go to the school and talk about it' to find someone to coach him then yeah I would ask him. But until then no because I don't think he is 100% sure what he wants to do, I really don't think he is 100% sure." (Lee's mum).

As Ball and Reay (1998) suggest, this reflects a common working class discourse of the 'child as expert'. In this discourse, parents allow children to make their own educational decisions, reflecting both a desire to respect a child's independence/ interests and parents' own assumptions that they themselves lack any particular expertise in this field.

A number of EAL girls claimed that they were *unaware of Connexions*, suggesting that the service may not be reaching a key target group. Nadia, Hapsa and Jermina (all at Blackwell Street) and Yesim (Cowick) maintained that they had not heard about Connexions, but when it was explained, they indicated that it might be useful to them, saying

"That is exactly what I want to know [...] that is all the things I want to know" (Nadia).

"I like people helping me [...] about what you do with the work, the different work- jobs, and different things- I don't know like, I don't know, I don't know about different jobs to ask [about]" (Hapsa).

“I haven’t heard of it. I will ask around because I need to talk to someone about it now, so that I know what I have to improve on before it gets too late. What I need to improve on and what I need to do to get what I want.” (Jermina).

Yesim also agreed during the interview that now she understood what Connexions does, she “might even go and speak to one of them”.

The problem was not solely confined to minority ethnic/ EAL girls. Kay (a white British girl at Cowick) also seemed unaware of Connexions, despite feeling at a loss in terms of her forthcoming transition from school to college: “I never had anyone to talk about it- to go to college after school you know. I don’t know much about college after school”. A review of the Connexions service (DfES, 2004b:9) highlights this risk, warning:

“Not all young people who would benefit from advice are receiving it. This gap is due to Connexions operating with fewer resources than was originally anticipated”.

The Connexions Advisors who were interviewed for this study also raised similar issues, expressing concern that they see fewer pupils than careers advisors would have seen in the past - with the upshot being that more pupils slip through the net without adequate careers provision. This failure was blamed not only on resources (time, space, and money) but the targeted nature of the service (aimed primarily at young people with statements) and on the self-referral model. As a Head of Year 11 added:

“[Connexions’] focus is more on children who have statements, children who are EAL. So some of these kids, some of these at risk are even more at risk because they’re going to fall through the net”.

The difference between Connexions and previous careers advice approaches was reiterated by one of the Connexions Advisors interviewed:

“it was called blanket interviews and you would see as many Year 11s as possible .... There wouldn’t be self-referral” so previously “I would probably have met most of them on that role. Now it is meaningless – I don’t know who is who really ... and so it just goes to show who is not being seen”.

This advisor also argued that despite more group work being undertaken, she could not provide ‘the same quality of service’ for picking up individual’s needs and “there is less time to spend with the kids”. Concern was expressed that the targeted provision also meant a “huge bulk of middle band kids” not accessing the service.

A range of *additional issues* concerning the service were raised by teaching staff and Connexions advisors themselves. Opinion was divided over the utility of the broad, holistic

remit of personal advisors (encompassing pastoral, social and careers support). Some of the advisors who came from a careers advice background found their broader role frustrating because “there is less emphasis on updating our knowledge in terms of like occupations and what employers are looking for”. This advisor continued, “I have gone from being a careers advisor to working with a kid about his anger management”, and expressed frustration at no longer being an expert in anything, being instead a point for ‘referring on’. In contrast, “the sort of holistic approach” was highlighted as a specific strength of the service by other advisors, particularly those who came from a youth work background. One such advisor described actively enjoying linking up with other services to provide a broader package of support to the young people in question, and praised the ‘freedom and flexibility’ that advisors are given to build relationships with pupils to help their engagement with the service.

The importance of good communication and relations with schools was raised by staff and Connexions advisors alike. Where good relations existed, these were felt to be greatly beneficial by both sides. Others felt that there was still work to be done to better define their remit of responsibility and to divide overlapping aspects of provision between Connexions and schools. Connexions advisors felt that their job worked best where schools took up aspects of general careers education (e.g. where careers was delivered through PSHE):

“It helps us to do our job because you are not sitting there explaining to the kids you know, ‘this is an A level, this is a BTEC’ ... you can just get on with the guidance bit.”

Partnership working between schools and advisors (e.g. advisors taking the odd lessons) were also regarded positively. However, sometimes the interests of the school were acknowledged to be in conflict with the advice and guidance being provided by Connexions advisors. For instance, examples were given of schools withholding, or suppressing, information about other (rival) colleges and 6<sup>th</sup> forms “because it’s bums on seats and money”.

Indeed, one Connexions advisor felt that his role comprised not only engaging with the young people, but also with school staff:

“Part of my job has been changing the attitude of the staff as well, I think... Not the managers, but the teaching staff who maybe see things more black and white, they maybe don't see the grey in between- 3 o'clock in the afternoon and 9 o'clock the next day, whereas that's the times I'd normally be working so I see all the things that happen to them before they get up to come to school and so I make them value the fact that they've actually got to school by half nine, is actually an achievement for quite a few of them because they might have been sleeping in the bin shed, they might not have gone to bed until 4 o'clock, whatever's

happened. So I raise the awareness. So we made a DVD for young people, I've commissioned it and got the funding and lots of the staff and lots of the senior staff and other adults have seen it, some were nearly crying cos the kids have such sad lives. So that's the barrier, sad lives is a barrier."

Concerns were additionally raised among advisors about the wider organisation of the Connexions service, notably regarding private sector involvement and contracting out of services. In particular, it was felt that there were often conflicting interests within the 'for profit' sector which generated ethical concerns because "the motivations of the organisations aren't necessarily young people focussed".

## **7.2 EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance)**

A quantitative review conducted for the DfEE of the first year of the EMA demonstrates that the 'EMA appears to have raised participation in education' by around five percentage points (Ashworth *et al* , 2001:1). The young people in this study were fairly evenly split as to whether they thought the EMA is a good scheme that encourages pupils to stay on at school post-16, or whether they felt that it has limitations. Pupils who felt there are limitations to the EMA identified a common range of issues affecting the scheme - although opinion divided as to whether the scheme is essentially a good idea that is just limited by these factors, or whether it is a 'bad idea' because of these factors.

**Positive views of the EMA** were expressed by 15 pupils (9 girls, 6 boys). These young people agreed- as Germaine put it- that the EMA is "a good thing". They identified two key reasons for their views: that the EMA *encourages motivation* among pupils to continue in further education and that it provides valuable practical *financial assistance* to make further study possible.

In terms of the former, the main positive effect of the EMA was identified as providing *motivation and encouragement* for young people to stay on in education. For example, Nadira said:

“Yeah I've heard a bit about it. I think it's a really good idea because it helps you like... sometimes I really can't be bothered with school it all gets on top of me and it is like I find it so difficult. If I knew like they were going to you know be giving you a bit of an allowance it would motivate you and you would think at least it would help. I think it is a good idea.”

Melissa was not aware of the scheme in her phase one interview, although she thought it sounded good and imagined that it might probably encourage her to stay on. By her phase 3 interview she was waiting for her EMA application to be processed and was attending an FE college. As Melissa waited for her first payment, she expressed some nervousness:

“Yeah I am going to try not to spend all of it cos, you know how girls love shopping and all of that. But I'm just gonna buy trainers and maybe a top or something...Yeah I have to plan it out and I'll probably buy my mum something”.

Melissa was now a strong advocate of the EMA and felt that it had made a difference for other young people:

“Yeah course I mean, there's few like 2 or 3 girls and a few boys as well in my college, in my class I mean and they're like oh if it wasn't for EMA I wouldn't come to college and so you know...”

David and his friend Harry also said that they would not have done their college courses if they had not received a financial payment:

“Not really. If we never got paid I would tell up to stick their course up their backside...But because cos we get paid, I am all right with it”

Boys in particular felt that the payment was good because it tapped into their preference for going out to work and earning a wage – hence the EMA helped to make further education a more attractive option:

“I think its good because like it gets more children into college and it helps them out a bit more with their education, and if they ain't got a good one. [How do you think it helps them?] [...] its just like if they was to go into college and do like a job kind of thing and then they get paid for it, I think that will help them. It will keep them off the streets [...] I think it would like put more people onto college” (Dan).

“I think students will come to school like if they get paid. Like they would rather go to work to get paid there but in school it is a free ride” (Steven).

In this respect, having the money to spend as they wanted- as if it were a ‘real wage’- was particularly valued (e.g. enabling young people to go to the cinema or buy clothes).

Several young people also reiterated the benefit of the EMA for providing the practical *financial assistance* that is necessary for poorer students to be able to continue in full time education. As Charlene and Darren explained,

“I think that is really good for students and it encourages the students to say ‘yes I would like to go to college’. If the government never gave students the money I don't think the majority would have gone to college. It would have been harder for them they have to buy books especially for the ones that are not working I think it is really good” (Charlene).

“I think that it is good for a living allowance it good. If they did not have the money to stay they would want to leave” (Darren).

Discussion group pupils also recognised how financial pressures within families could otherwise render further study an impractical and impossible option:

“Some people might need the money and they might drop out of school because they need to have an income, like they’ve moved out, or they Mum stopped working or they’re a single parent and they ain’t got enough money. They might need the money and if they dropped out of school they’d be missing out”.

The majority of teachers felt that the EMA was a good idea and made a particular impact on students from the most impoverished backgrounds:

“I think it might have a big impact on some students here. I talked earlier on about students wanting cash in the hand pretty quickly and I think any financial reward that the student can get will certainly be looked at by the students and encouraged. I can give you an example. I’m currently looking for prefects for the school. Now to be a prefect in the past wasn’t necessarily something that all the students wanted to do. You know, a bit of a boffin or a bit of a, I don’t want to be too rude - but now it’s more structured. I’ve not done this but other people have and they get paid and they get paid £20 per half term so every six weeks they get £20. That doesn’t sound a lot but the amount of students that are now asking to be a prefect or are applying to be a prefect - and I’m certain that the money has got something to do with that.” (Head of Year).

“I really feel for children in this area, it’s financial. If you’ve got a one parent family you may have two or three other young kids, family need money and I think a lot of these kids they should be out earning, rather than going into education. And I think if we could encourage them. Why can’t we give them some sort of a wage for being in college, for actually going on and getting further education, instead of penalising them by making them pay once they get to university. I think we should be encouraging them even more.” (Head of Year).

“I think it’s vital, I think the students, especially in, you know, when I went into a deprived area, giving them an incentive, a money incentive to stay on. A, it gets parents on side. B, gets the students interested, it’s, the difficulty we have at the sixth form period, is that they have to work part time and it’s about fitting in work around A Level courses.” (Teacher).

**Negative views and limitations of the EMA** were voiced by 17 pupils (6 girls, 11 boys). These young people identified a common range of limitations or problems with the scheme, but were fairly evenly divided as to whether they felt the scheme was generally good, albeit

limited by these factors (9 pupils: 2 girls, 7 boys) or whether these limitations made it a 'bad idea' (8 pupils: 4 girls, 4 boys).

Young people commonly felt that the most negative aspect of the scheme was that the payment is not sufficient to change the minds of those who do not want to stay on. In particular, the level of payment was felt to be too low, and it was argued that (a) the money is not enough to change the minds of those who do not want to stay on (b) the money encourages or bribes pupils to stay on 'for the wrong reasons' (c) it only creates a more attractive 'fall back' position and (d) targeting the few is not 'fair' on others.

In terms of the first criticism, pupils felt that whilst the EMA is beneficial for young people who would want to stay on anyway in education, it is not enough to change the minds of those who would not otherwise stay on. The benefits of the scheme were thus recognised, but they were also qualified – as Darrel explained, "I think it is a good idea, but only if they really like school a lot". A number of pupils (like James) added that the scheme is a good idea for *other* young people, but did not necessarily see it as relevant to themselves or their post-16 aspirations. Jason took a slightly different view, suggesting that the EMA might have some value only as a 'fall back' option for those young people who were finding it hard to access the labour market:

"No it's, I don't know, yeah that's quite encouraging in fact. Well a lot of the kids they aren't working right now, they're finding it hard to find a place to work. So if they are getting money for going to school then hey".

A Connexions advisor agreed with this view, seeing the EMA as an "added bonus" for those pupils who had already decided to stay on, rather than changing the decisions of those who want to leave ("it's nice that they get it, but it doesn't influence them staying on or going on to college or sixth form"). Otherwise, the advisor was generally very positive about the scheme and felt that awareness of the EMA was good on the whole and that the money tended to come through quickly.

"That has worked very well, we found that through the summer we found that we had lots of young people coming in straight after their GCSE results, you know, focusing then on the EMA, and you know, the information's very clear".

The only problem that she identified was where parents and young people did not have bank accounts. However, she does not think it will make a difference to young people's post-16 decisions.

Among the young people, it was commonly felt that the level of payment is too low to change the minds of those who are not planning or wanting to stay on in education.

“If it was more, then they'd all be at school for it, yeah. But if they're staying at school anyway, you know, it'll be, they'll like that [...] Yeah, if someone is leaving school and you put that [current level of EMA] in their face it's not really changing” (Robert).

One of the reasons given to support this view was that most jobs pay more than the EMA, rendering it not a cost-effective option:

“If you get a job they'll give you more money.” (Dan).

“If you leave school, go into a job, they're going to pay you more money than £30 [...] I still wouldn't do it [...] I think people who like school would definitely stay on because like they are getting money for coming to school. But I think for bad people you are going to have to give them loads more money to stay on. [...] What is the point in saying well if you are getting like £30 a week or something and you could go and get a job that pays you like £100 a week or something ... It depends on what career you want to do but if you have got nothing then there is no point in staying on because you could get a job like say in a shop or something that pays like £170 a week or something. It is better than staying on at school and getting like £30 a week” (Lee).

Lee's mum agreed that it might encourage some pupils to stay on, but not others like her son:

“I think that would encourage the kids to stay on at school because then they have got that spending money instead of hitting their mother all the time or their father they have got that—that's their own money [... But] no my Lee won't give a shit about the money. He won't give two hoots because he will think well I will get more than that [working]”.

It was also felt that £30 per week was an insufficient amount to live on:

“ ... it should be slightly more [...] Because £30 is not that not a lot. Even though its weekly but £30 [...] it's not really enough”. (Yr. 11 girls group discussion, Cowick)

“If you can't, if you are with your mum and that and they don't give you no money, you can't really live on £30 a day” (Lacie).

“If it was a little bit higher then other people would stay more. Like £50 or £60 anyone would stay here more” (Helal).

Roger felt strongly that it was “not at all” enough and disappears too quickly (“it's gone”). Max agreed that the £30 per week allowance was not enough to tempt him to stay on (“it ain't enough to get me through”). Mark (Littleton) had actually tried to apply for the EMA, but became disheartened and embarrassed when the form was returned to him because he had made a mistake filling it in, saying “so now I just can't be bothered with it”. For pupils who lack confidence and/or literacy skills, the process of official form filling can be daunting and

knock-backs can result in non-application. Hence Mark felt that re-engaging with the process was “not worth” £30 a week.

Several young people emphasised that the success of policies aimed at increasing staying on rates, like the EMA, will only work if young people actually buy into them, and strong resistance was voiced to being railroaded into staying on:

“If I picked it, if *they* didn’t pick it, if *I* picked it and I liked it then I would stay on. But if they picked it and I didn’t really like it then I won’t really probably enjoy it because they picked it and I never had no choice in picking and so...” (Latoya).

For some young people, the whole notion of being given money to stay in school was linked to notions of dependency and hence was viewed as less attractive than being able to earn money independently, in one’s own right:

“I don’t know really because I am not other people if you know what I mean. I don’t really know what other people think but if someone was to pay me to stay in school I would say ‘no’ - I wouldn’t want money to stay in school because I would want to earn it myself, if you know what I mean?” (Kay).

However, it was also recognised that increasing the level of payment could create another dilemma – namely encouraging/ ‘*bribing*’ young people to stay on for ‘the wrong reasons’, simply collecting the money and not engaging in learning:

“It does but it could encourage them in the wrong way. They might just choose any old course you know just to get the money” (Year 11 discussion group, Cowick).

“I think it is good in one way but in another way most people will just be going for the money they wouldn’t be really into their work. I think it should be limited to some people” (Sarah).

These warnings echo Furlong & Cartmel’s (1997) analysis of governmental policies that are creating an ‘army of reluctant conscripts’ to post-compulsory education.

Young people were concerned that the EMA could look like a ‘bribe’ (“that’s not fair because that’s basically bribing kids to stay on at school”, as one Year 11 discussion group put it), which might lead to disengagement:

“I think it’s rubbish [Int: Why?] Cos if you’re going to stay on at college, you shouldn’t do it for the money. [Int: OK. Do you think it makes a difference to some people with them staying on?] No, not really cos they’ll just, if they want the money they’ll just stay on and just mess about and just wait for the money” (Mark).

“I think people would go on but not want to do it just want to have the money and not want to learn anymore .... People that want to stay wouldn’t really bother about the money but people

that wouldn't normally want to stay on might just stay on just to get the money and not learn anymore" (Lacie).

"I think peoples' lives, peoples' education is, should be up to them, they shouldn't be, I think, I think, that is really ridiculous that they're paying people to stay on. Because if they, if they're doing it just for the money, in the end, their hearts are not going to be in what they get out of it and so, I think peoples' lives are what, go the way they have made it go" (Jane).

Mike's mum also agreed, that whilst the scheme is a "good idea" for some pupils (those who are "quite intelligent"), it was bad for those who are not interested in staying on in education:

"... it seems this year a lot have come back that really should have been expelled last year and [they] have come back just to doss because they're getting paid for it".

A Connexions Adviser expressed similarly mixed feelings about the EMA, feeling that it could lead to people staying on for the wrong reasons.

"The EMA, what is it, £30 a week. They can sell a bit of draw for £30 a week...it's not going to influence them to go to school...cos it's not enough money [...] I don't know necessarily that that's the right motivation. The motivation has to be the young person wants to learn."

Several teachers also agreed that the monetary motivation could backfire:

"I mean, if students want to stay on I always think that, even if they were getting money for it to stay on, if it's not truly what they want to do they won't see the year out anyway, more than two years." (Head of Year).

"It smacks of desperation really from the Government that they're trying to do the whole thing to keep kids on at school, which is not a bad idea, but it's not the most bright one I suppose, not corruption, but bribery." (Head of Year).

### **7.3 Vocational college release schemes**

As Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) detail, there is a long history of working class young people being channelled into vocational education pathways, which have been of lesser status and prestige than 'academic' routes and qualifications. The Tomlinson Report (2004)<sup>5</sup> highlighted this issue of creating greater parity between academic and vocational education and drew attention to the need for not only high quality vocational provision, but better opportunities for achievement and progression within vocational education. The

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<sup>5</sup> Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (Tomlinson Report), London: DfES Publications, October 2004.

government's response (DfES 2005)<sup>6</sup> clearly associates vocational provision with the re-engagement of disengaged and disaffected learners – although many critics argue that the response does not go far enough to meet the challenges outlined by Tomlinson.

A number of pupils in this study were taking vocational courses through college release schemes, spending between 1 and 5 days a week at a local FE college. Most of these pupils were boys learning trade skills (sampling of a variety of manual trades) or motor vehicle maintenance. Those girls who took part mostly followed hair and beauty or catering. As detailed below, pupils who were engaged in these courses were highly positive about their learning and recounted positive effects on their engagement and attendance. However, as will also be suggested, it was also evident that the courses were narrowing the young people's horizons of choice from the age of 14.

The young people were highly positive about their vocational courses for various reasons, including not only the content of the course, but also the fact that it was delivered outside school. Many of the young people had experienced difficult relations with their schools and so learning in a college provided them with a “fresh start thing” (Nathan). As one teacher recognised:

“Whatever you can provide them alternatively to school, they tend to succeed in. Because they're in a mindset that it's not school and 'I will-', you know, 'I will go in every day on time to work, but with school, you know, I'll be ten, 15 minutes late every single day'” (Teacher).

The college environment was also viewed positively and the young people felt that colleges treated them more like adults in comparison to school, which again increased their motivation to attend and engage. The vocational curriculum was also viewed positively by these pupils as offering a greater chance of success than the mainstream academic school curriculum.

Vocational courses were widely viewed as more interesting and enjoyable than ‘traditional’ school subjects (“Because we get to do something we really like instead of sitting in school and not really enjoying it”), but they were also linked with feelings of competency and confidence. Pupils who had struggled with an ‘academic’ school curriculum felt that the practical nature of vocational courses suited them better and boosted their confidence in

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<sup>6</sup>14-19 Education and Skills, White Paper, London: DfES Publications, February 2005.

learning (“... it has given us an extra boost sort of thing. We can do it now”). This was recognised by pupils and parents alike:

‘Yes since I have been at [course name] I have got more confident about doing work [...] I think it is where it easier it has made me more confident’ (Lacie).

“He loves it but he got a good report with mechanics. I think it is because he is using his brain and he ain't got to write nothing down on a bit of paper, he is using his brain and his hands” (Lee’s mum).

For many pupils, these courses offered their first feelings of success in relation to themselves and learning/education for a long time- a point that a number of staff recognised as an integral part of the schemes’ success:

“ ...it’s working with the counsellors and working with the mentors to get to the bottom of what the issues are and then finding a particular interest and finding a course that will tap into that. So for instance, at this very moment we’ve just arranged for example, a mechanics, a kind of course at a college for a Year 10 boy who is illiterate but really is keenly interested in being a mechanic and so the idea is that, that interest in mechanics will feed an interest in learning to read, which will make him literate and therefore be able to go further into and get him to become a skilled mechanic. So it’s really trying to find something that will keep the kids in education, [the scheme is] actually quite good.” (Assistant Head Teacher).

“Well I think that’s what the college does. It’s saying to these students, look there are things out there that you can do and these are some of the things that might be looking to do [...] They’re not academically able to cope as well as other students in school but there are things out there that you can do and these jobs are very valuable and actually in very high demand and I think it’s about self worth for students, to feel that they belong to society and that they have a job that they can actually do and that they can be very good at it. People need success and I’m sure it is frustrating when they feel, as a lot of them do feel, that they’re not able to succeed at school because maybe they’re not able to.” (Head of Year 10).

Participation in vocational college release courses also impacted on the horizons and post-16 routes of a number of the young people. For example, Mike (Hillside Park) developed his aspiration to be a plumber or plasterer from his college course and by Year 11, had been referred to college full-time to pursue courses in the relevant trade skills. Similarly, Mike (Littleton) had originally hoped to become a fireman, but changed his mind over the course of the project and now wanted to be a bricklayer, after doing a course in this on his college release scheme. For several young people, their participation on vocational courses also directly helped them to access particular popular post-16 courses because it boosted their CVs, providing relevant experience and qualifications. For example, John said of his recent acceptance onto a FE college course “... if I didn’t go to college like Thursday and Friday I don’t think I would probably be getting that course thing”.

For some of the pupils, their attendance at college through the schemes also changed their view of further education. For instance, Mark (Hillside Park) explained how he now understood how FE could be combined with work and how this could help further his opportunities:

“I did want to get a job straight after school, [but now] I do want to go to college cos I know then it will help me get the job. Because like people that I know have gone there and they go, like, to college once a day and then the rest of the day, they might be on site or something. So I want to go to college to learn more, so that I can get a better job”.

Similarly, Lacie now planned to continue with further hair and beauty courses when she leaves school, where she had previously assumed that she would leave and start working (“I thought I would, like, just straightaway leave school and go into a job and it would be better than studying again”). The experience of learning in an FE institution thus provided many pupils with insight and experience of what further education might be like and thus rendered it a more ‘real’ and ‘thinkable’ option.

As some pupils and staff also noted, however, an issue remains in that vocational courses are not given the same parity of esteem as academic courses. Hence several pupils selected for vocational courses described themselves as “lower” than other pupils – with obvious social justice implications. As Scott (a discussion group pupil) put it, “...we are like ... lower than the other classes, we are the lowest. Say the higher groups and that, when they do all the higher stuff, right, they go out on trips and all that”. Similarly, Del (in the same discussion group) identified himself as a ‘lower level’ pupil and understood that he was not expected to succeed without the intervention:

“They are giving us extra opportunities because they don’t think we are going to be as good as them [higher level pupils] in life so they are giving us extra opportunities ... We can succeed in a different skill”.

As one deputy head explained, the status differentials between academic and vocational educational routes reflect entrenched class bias within society, which are difficult to challenge:

“The problem is that the so called parity between vocational paths and academic paths doesn’t exist and I wonder if it ever will. We are a terribly class based society. You know what it is like in England it wouldn’t make any difference whether a plumber is earning £500,000 a year and a vicar was earning £10,000, the vicar is still perceived as being of a higher social class than the plumber and you know, going to a traditional University to read geography is seen as far more valid than going to, I don’t know, Luton and studying a degree, I don’t know, I can’t even think of a name but something highly vocational and high specific”. (Deputy Head).

## 7.4 Learning Mentors

Learning Mentors were introduced into schools under the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative to address underachievement in urban areas- although across the country there are also a number of other mentoring schemes operated by a variety of other providers (e.g. through Education Action Zones, charities and local schools).

There was some degree of cross-over between the work of Connexions personal advisors and Learning Mentors (LM), and this reflected to some degree the different ways in which these staff defined their own roles and remit. For example, one Connexions Adviser felt that learning mentors “tend to be very much more outreach”. A learning mentor described her role as combining “one to one” personal advising (“getting them back into school, getting course work updated, just putting them back on track”) with group work around personal/ social and health issues (for example, bullying awareness and sex education).

Young people recounted varying experiences of mentoring. Charlene, Kemisha and Jade (Cowick), Jordan (Blackwell Street) and Tim and Ben (both at Hillside Park) all reported that they found seeing a mentor positive and useful. For some, this was due to the practical advice and support that they had received. For instance, Ben’s mentor had helped him to organise his work experience by making telephone calls on his behalf because Ben felt “I sound like a doughnut on the phone”. For the majority of young people, their mentors were invaluable for raising their confidence and self-esteem, as well as helping them with schoolwork and providing pastoral support.

“She just makes me laugh and makes me feel good. She helps me with my work, she gives me advice” (Tim, Hillside Park).

“They helped me with my vocabulary so that did help and I became more confident. When I came in year 7 at the beginning I did get teased and stuff but then towards- at the end I started to be stronger. My mentor in year 6 in primary she helped me a lot. [...] She told me I need to be strong. I was very quiet and she brought me out and made me stronger. [Int: How often did you see her?] 3 or 4 times a week. (Charlene, Cowick).

Charlene's relationship with her mentor was clearly helpful in getting her through a difficult period of her life and adjusting to school. While, at the time of the interview, Charlene did not have another mentor, she felt OK with this, because her previous mentor had equipped her to deal with problems ("she has done what she had to do, and said what she had to say. And now it is on me").

Mentors not only helped pupils to deal with bullying and supported their learning, but also helped them to identify and tackle the causes of truancy. Jade, for example, described how her mentor helped her to address her truancy and to gain a new perspective on her life and social relations:

Int: What difference do you think that counsellor has made to your life?

Jade: She's made me understand more

Int: Understand what?

Jade: Like why we're meant to be in school and why we've got friends and enemies and stuff

Like other young people, Jade valued the positive interpersonal relationship that her mentor had generated with her, and which underpinned the success of the relationship ("I think she's really nice and she's funny [...] She knows what to say, like she says all the right things. There's nothing that she's ever said wrong and she gives good advice".) Jordan was similarly highly positive about her learning mentor and his pastoral skills, and described working with him to try and catch up on her work:

"Rob, he could be having the worst day of his life and he'd still have time to sit there and listen, so. I'm not a very good one with coping with problems, I storm up to [place name] and tell Rob and he sits me down and calms me down and tells me 'it'll be all right, it'll be all right, we'll sort it out'".

Kemisha also described how her mentor had helped her to address problems that she was experiencing with particular teachers at school ("She went to the geography teacher and I don't know what she said to her and then she [teacher] sort of stopped picking on me").

Whilst most pupils were positive about their learning mentors, a few were not. Yesim, for instance said:

Yesim: Well basically you used to go to a mentor once or twice a week and speak to her about what you do in school. How would you develop your work... and things like that. If you're late, why are you late? How can you resolve this? And things like that. I don't really find that useful as I said.

Int: Why didn't you find it useful?

Yesim: Because as soon as they started they're very stupid, they're like why are you late to school, its because you woke up late or you couldn't catch a bus or if there was traffic, whatever. But they can't stop that can they?

Although, as noted earlier, Yesim did actually enjoy a very close relationship with one of the teachers at her school (whom she saw as a "mother" figure), and hence may not have felt she needed another mentor relationship.

## 7.5 Widening participation

In Section 6.6 we detailed pupils views on further and higher education, but the young people were also asked more generally about their views on the government's policy for widening participation in higher education (i.e. the notion of encouraging more young people like themselves to apply to university). Respondents varied in their opinions, with some feeling the goal to be somewhat unrealistic, some thinking that whilst the idea is good 'for others' it made no difference to their own lives, and others feeling it to be a good and desirable goal.

Darren (Littleton) was among those who felt the principle of widening participation to be unrealistic:

Int: The government have got this idea that they want half of all the young people who are leaving school to go to university. What do you think of that idea?  
Darren: If you could ever get half the people in this school that are leaving to go to university, I'd be shocked  
Int: Why would you be shocked?  
Darren: Cos no one that I know wants to go to university. They want to go to college and then get a job  
Int: So why do you think it is that they don't want to go to university?  
Darren: I don't know but most people won't go to university unless they're smart and there's not many smart people in my year  
Int: Why do you think that is?  
Darren: They're just not  
Int: Do you think people think it's important to get a job?  
Darren: Well no, it's just that most people want to do what they want to do, not like go to university. Because if you think about it, there's not many universities in this country. There's about 100.

Many respondents, but particularly boys (like John, Robert and Roger), suggested that widening participation is a "good idea" for *other* people, but not themselves. Robert also felt that the main use of widening participation was for the government to ensure that there are more people working "for the government... in offices".

Some pupils were more in favour of the idea, particularly because they thought it might offer them a chance to go to university in the future. These views were more likely to be voiced by girls, like Nadira (Eastleigh Central), who said “I think it is a good idea because I have always wanted to go to university. It would be an added bonus to have like a degree it would be so much easier to get the job you want”. Similarly, Sarah (Eastleigh Central) was in favour of the idea, and had obviously been impressed by an intervention she had witnessed from Connexions:

“I think it is like good like Connexions they came and did a show and everything. I think it is really good because a lot of people are dropping out of school which I think isn't good. I think it is good what the government are doing to encourage them to stay on and get better jobs and be educated”.

Among the parents and staff interviewed, views on the issue were quite polarised. Mike's mum and one of the Connexions advisors felt the 50% target was realistic and achievable. Whilst others, like another Connexions Advisor and a number of heads of year/ deputy heads expressed reservations as to whether the policy was actually counter-productive for the young people that it targets:

“Because what? Because it reduces cost of the welfare state? Why don't they want 50% of them to be in employment? Lots of these young people just want to leave school and earn money, and for most young people I've worked with, going to work and earning money is the thing that stops them being criminals. It gives them a bit of status. When they come back on a Friday, it's like, 'I've got my pay packet, wicked man, look!' They might go and spend it on pills and go out tripping all weekend or whatever, but they made the money, they didn't have to steal it, they didn't have to borrow it, they didn't have to do some ducking and diving, alright? And they tend to start mixing with people who are working - not saying that everyone who works is a perfect example - but they start to mix with people who have got families and have to pay bills and they start to see this different life that they don't see at home. Where I worked on the [estate name], out of 1250 families, 69% had no-one working for three years or longer. So those kids don't grow up with a work ethic, they don't grow up with, you know. So it's kind of like, part of education. If they haven't got any lower education, what's the point of getting a higher education? It's kind of... I'm not sure what they want that for” (Connexions Adviser).

“I mean, you know, Blair and Co. want school leaving age to be 18. I guess it just depends on what you call school. I mean if staying in school until you're 18 means sitting down in a classroom listening to teachers talking at you then it is a disaster because there is no way that a quite significant percentage of our population probably anywhere in the world can deal with that for 18 years of their life. If being at school means that you could be doing level two course in motor vehicle maintenance or in trade skills, plastering, plumbing as well as making sure your English, maths and your IT are up to speed at the same time” (Deputy Head).

“There's also a lot of disaffection with you know the academia, the curriculum I suppose and I think in many ways some of these kids need other skills and other training, personally that's

what I feel and it seems to be a bit unrealistic to have these huge percentage targets and some of these kids are just not going to reach that and maybe they'd be better suited having other training.” (Head of Year 10).

Some staff suggested that rather than widening university participation, the government might better serve the young people in question by investing in more vocational courses:

“Try and find a plumbers course post-16, it's really difficult. There are some electrical courses post-16 but the actual, the crafts, the vocational courses get full very quickly - there's not enough of them and the breadth just isn't there. So I think if they want to be looking at people making progress that's what they need to be focussing on. What are they actually offering and who's picking up on it?” (Head of Year 11).

As noted earlier, young people like Jordan were strongly dissuaded from thinking about university by the financial aspects, notably the student loans policy. Parents were unsure, although Mike's mum worried “I mean, the borrowing money bit is a bit- puts you in debt from very young”. Among the staff interviewed, all but one felt that student loans were a bad idea that put off young working class people from thinking about higher education and created additional financial pressures for the families of students<sup>7</sup>.

“Well you know I went to college. I'm one of these very working class people that came from a tower block in South Wales. I was encouraged by my teachers to go to university and I never thought I'd ever have a chance and I did and I went, and everything in my college education was paid for. Now my parents wouldn't have been able to afford to do this and I think, whilst I'm sure there are financial incentives for certain students to go, I think you've got to scrap these tuition fees without a shadow of a doubt.” (Head of Year 10).

“ ... that's going to kill the sort of kids that we've got in this school going to university... These kids around this area their parents can't afford it, the kids can't afford it.” (Head of Year 10).

For many staff, the government targets and increased pressure on schools to improve post-16 progression rates generated a deep sense of unease as to whether the policy was really in the best interests of poorer students:

“We've got to make sure that if we are genuinely advising someone to follow a course that is going to put them into £12,000, £15,000, £20,000 worth of debt, that we are doing that for that child's own good and not just to meet the number of kids we have going to University from a school. When we've taught sixth formers in the past it wasn't, we weren't subjecting them to that, you know? And if they went to University and didn't like it, well at least it hadn't cost them.” (Deputy Head).

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<sup>7</sup> Often respondents (pupils, teachers and parents) did not distinguish clearly between the related, but separate, issues of (top-up) tuition fees and student loans – collapsed together views on each aspect. Hence the views expressed relate also to tuition fees and the new top-up fees policy.

However, the one member of staff who felt that finance was not an issue, explained how a lot of young people's fears around debt are often based on misconceptions about the nature of the loans taken out. This learning mentor suggested in particular that when it was explained to pupils that the student loan is "a really low interest rate and that you can pay it back bit by bit", many young people became more positive about the prospect of university.

## **7.6 Citizenship Education**

The project asked young people and staff about the introduction of citizenship education, in order to ascertain whether this might have an effect on young people's engagement with schooling and their aspirations. However, in most of the schools in question, citizenship education was integrated into other lessons (namely PSHE) and did not constitute a lesson in its own right, hence pupils found it difficult to answer questions about Citizenship Education per se. PSHE lessons were considerably broader than citizenship education alone, including for example religious education, health/sex education, careers education and a range of other areas. Hence it was impossible to disaggregate the impact of 'citizenship education' from other forms of personal and social education and other aspects of schooling (such as pupils' participation in school councils). As two different Heads of Year explained:

"It takes place during the PHSE lessons but broader than that, we also encompass RE into that and we have RE weeks. We don't have RE as a timetabled subject but we'll abandon or suspend a timetable for a week and Year 7 and Year 8 will be involved in RE activities and we have different speakers coming in from all different religions and do workshops or students will visit mosques or cathedrals, but that would be a part of it. But I think there's a good citizenship programme in place but it mainly takes place in PHSE lessons. We have school councils so they have their own voice and they're pretty vocal. They do like to say their bit."

"It is not a citizenship lesson as such, I mean we have PSHRE... citizenship has always been there it is just now they have decided to actually be really specific and give it a name and there is an exam. We don't do an exam yet but some schools do."

Within this, pupils seemed to be mostly happy with the personal and social education that they received and felt it to be "useful", particularly when it addressed issues around careers and aspirations. For example, Ben (Hillside Park) said:

“Yeah, it is useful in some ways because then it just, it backs up your memory because you start thinking of what you done and what then put that altogether and then you can think of what you want to do in the future. So yeah it does help you”.

A few pupils did talk about citizenship classes, where it was named as such. These lessons were generally seen as “debating classes”, and although generally described as “boring”, there was also some suggestion that a few young people were actually more active and engaged in these lessons than in more ‘academic’ subjects. For instance, Tim took several photographs for his photo diary of his citizenship class and teacher and indicated that he is always putting his hand up and getting involved in this lesson (unlike other subjects). He also notably discussed the content of this lesson, unlike others:

Int: What are those classes like?

Tim: Oh they’re boring.

Int: Are they?

Tim: Yeah.

Int: Do you get to debate stuff or like talk and discuss?

Tim: No, in there I always put my hand up and I piss the teacher off, for some strange reason, for answering all the questions, yeah, she gets annoyed.

Int: What, do you answer them like, annoyingly?

Tim: No, no she will say ‘what’s this?’ So (I put up my hand up) ‘yes’, ‘yes’, ‘yes’, I keep putting my hand up and she’s like ‘give someone else a chance will you’. We was learning about Guantanamo Bay Prisoners.

Int: And what does she do, does she just ask questions at the front about...?

Tim: It’s like a debating lesson.

Int: (next photo) Then when she’s next to me I took one close up and she got annoyed.

Int: So was everyone deciding about what should happen to prisoners at Guantanamo Bay?

Tim: No it weren’t that. The people on Guantanamo Bay they got like, they’re not allowed to see family or any contact with them until their sentence was over and stuff like that, and they got tortured in there. We was talking about ‘do you think they got tortured?’ And all that.

Conversely, a number of pupils suggested that they tended to truant from PSHE and citizenship lessons because they are not ‘real’ lessons – i.e. they are not examined or are seen as non-compulsory and unimportant aspects of school.

## **SECTION EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This report has pointed towards the complexity of pupil disengagement and non-progression among urban, working class young people. Whilst the factors promoting disengagement are undoubtedly complex and multiple, in many ways the issues affecting these young people reflect the fact that they are ‘living’ social inequality in their daily lives. Social and cultural issues were paramount in shaping their relationships with education and they lacked the economic and social buffers enjoyed by many middle class pupils. Of course, schools and allied services cannot be expected to ‘magic away’ such issues. But the evidence suggests that school and educational issues can not only play a role in fostering or exacerbating disengagement and non-progression, but can actually make an important difference in combating it. It was often in the small spaces and critical moments enacted within interpersonal relations that re-engagement was (re)ignited. Respect, care and empathy between educational professionals and young people were crucially important and influential factors. There also appears to be scope for wider educational structures and policies to make a difference. Disengagement and non-progression did not simply reflect a lack of ability or intelligence on the part of pupils, and the study mapped both the wastage and nurturing of talent among the young people in question. In particular, the study raises important challenges for government if it is to substantially address the ‘leaky pipeline’ of working class learners through the educational system. It will require not just small, but large-scale investment and social change to really plug the holes.

Below, recommendations and implications are discussed. First, we detail participants’ own recommendations and suggestions (pupils, parents and teachers). The report then concludes with a set of wider implications and ideas for change arising from the study.

#### **8.1 Participants’ recommendations**

Pupils, parents and staff were all asked for their suggested recommendations. When asked what they would like to happen, or to change, in order to support them to achieve what they want in education and in life generally, the young people often found it difficult to answer and were not sure what to say. In one sense, this suggests in itself that more work might

usefully be done with helping young people to reflect on their own learning and education and to support them in voicing their views and opinions. Among those who did offer some suggestions, their recommendations ranged from 'big', broad, national policy issues (such as addressing poverty in communities, reducing crime/drugs) through to micro, everyday issues (providing lockers in school). To summarise, the **young people's recommendations** included:

- Improving impoverished local areas – this not only meant addressing crime and drugs but also providing more activities and spaces for young people.
- Making a range of non-curriculum changes within schools – it was suggested that even 'small' changes would make a difference to pupils' lives. For example, issues around uniform (notably allowing pupils to wear branded clothes and trainers), having different kinds of food in the canteen and providing lockers so that pupils do not have to carry their books and equipment around all day.
- Making teaching/ learning and curriculum changes – it was suggested that pupils would benefit from (more) 1:1 assistance and support with their learning. There was also widespread support for more vocational education and college release schemes.
- Aspirations and careers education/ advice – greater support, guidance and information relating to careers and aspirations was felt to be important.
- Addressing/ being sensitive to the delivery of additional support. This was raised as an issue, with pupils wanting greater sensitivity in how extra help is provided so that they do not feel stigmatised or singled out.

**Parents' recommendations** centred predominantly on the additional learning support that parents wanted for their own children:

- Provision of extra-curricula support was felt to be crucial, such as additional lessons, one-to-one tutoring and after-school revision classes.
- In-lesson support was also highlighted, particularly providing pupils with literacy support alongside/in their normal lessons.
- Quicker/ better identification of learning needs and issues such as dyslexia was raised as important.
- Clearer, more detailed and swifter communication from schools about disciplinary and achievement issues.

The largest range and volume of recommendations and examples of good practice (of what schools can do to help) were raised in **staff recommendations**. These included:

- Expanding vocational curriculum provision – this was one of the most popular recommendations. It was suggested that vocational educational provision should be expanded both outside school, through college release courses, but also within the mainstream curriculum, e.g. using practical and ‘hands-on’ activities and making the curriculum relevant to the everyday lives of students. It was suggested that schools might usefully explore the potential for linking up with other providers to expand the range and opportunities for vocational education.
- Increased pastoral provision - calls were made for increased targeted, 1:1 mentoring and support for pupils.
- Ensuring that a school has an open, welcoming and non-elitist sixth form that can appeal to a range of students across levels of achievement and subject areas.
- Ensure multi-disciplinary, co-ordinated support services are in place- these were felt to provide a useful holistic package of support to pupils and enable staff to develop a broader understanding of a pupil’s circumstances.
- Developing close and effective home-school links. For example, talking with parents swiftly and often where there are issues; liaising closely with parents about pupil absence, using report books to monitor attendance and ensuring that all materials sent home are translated into community languages.
- Ensure that schools are a place of safety for pupils, especially for those with unsettled and difficult home lives.
- Changing the terminology of ‘at risk’ - this was suggested as a means for making the issue less threatening to pupils.
- Providing more opportunities for individual attention in class and providing teaching/ learning in small classes/ groups.
- Target truancy through monitoring and patrol systems to reduce in-school truancy. Bring break-times into alignment to make it easier to spot absences.
- Provide opportunities for pupils to undertake paid employment whilst at school (e.g. structuring timetables to provide one complete free day for paid work) to help them cut down their after-hours working.
- Provide a broad package of information, knowledge and experiences to help pupils broaden their aspirations.

- Provide a good variety of trips, both academic and social, to help build good relationships between staff and pupils.
- Enable pupils to exercise a greater/ free choice of subject options.
- Ensure that appropriate individual support is provided for SEN pupils both in class and in examinations (e.g. providing a scribe in examinations or providing computers for pupils to type answers as opposed to writing by hand).
- Address the privatisation of public education (particularly in relation to the provision of careers advice and guidance).

## **8.2 Overall Implications and Suggestions**

These are grouped together under thematic headings. They appeal to action across a range of levels and sites- both national/ governmental and local levels.

### **Ideas for addressing damaged learner identities**

- Develop pupil confidence through the provision of additional academic and pastoral support. Extend academic support provision e.g. through additional in-lesson support from classroom assistants and through breakfast/ breaktime or after-school revision/ catch-up classes. Provide pupils with opportunities to learn in small groups. Target literacy issues. Invest in more pastoral provision (e.g. through personal advisors, learning mentors and/or providing teachers with time to engage in pastoral support), particularly 1:1 support. Expansion of LMs may be particularly useful.
- Increase opportunities for low achieving pupils to develop confidence and esteem and to feel part of/valued by the school by offering extra responsibilities as a form prefect/monitor or school council representative. Encourage disengaged pupils to get involved in aspects of the school image and ethos – some suggestions might involving pupils in reviewing school uniform policies or designing a school logo, tie or other symbolic or practical item.
- Review setting practices and explore what support might be provided to bottom set pupils to help counter issues of low esteem.
- Ensure there is adequate sensitivity around the delivery of additional learning support to pupils. This was raised as an issue by various pupils who had concerns about feeling

stigmatised or singled out. Address (for example using PSHE lessons) issues that affect pupils negatively in relation to peer relations and pressures to conform.

- Create regular opportunities to help young people to ‘change’ their pupil / learner identities in school. For example, through designated ‘amnesty’ points, when a pupil’s previous slate is wiped clean and support is provided to help re-engagement. This might be particularly useful in Year 10, to encourage the process of change to begin earlier (it is more prevalent currently in Year 11). It may also be useful for encouraging pupils (especially boys) to become more reflective about their pupil and learner identities and to feel more agency with regard to bringing about change.

### **Ideas for supporting staff to engage with disaffected pupils**

- Support multi-disciplinary, co-ordinated support services to provide a holistic package of support to pupils and to enable staff to develop broader/ deeper understandings of pupils’ circumstances.
- Support staff to develop complex understandings of how education can be both valued and resisted among pupils and their families.
- Promote sensitivity and empathy among staff to the difficulties faced by pupils in home lives, and consider how achievements that might otherwise be viewed as unextraordinary or mundane (e.g. regular attendance, punctuality) might be rewarded/ encouraged among these pupils.
- Ensure there are systems that enable quick and accurate identification of learning needs and issues such as dyslexia.
- Provide extra support to new or temporary staff and establish (regular) spaces/ opportunities for staff to share ideas and good practice.
- Creating explicit mechanisms for establishing a ‘clean slate’ with pupils who have been in trouble.
- Employ high quality, “productive pedagogies” (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2004) to ensure that working class pupils are challenged intellectually, provided with a curriculum that connects with the world beyond the classroom, are adequately supported with their learning within the classroom and are encouraged to “value and engage with difference”.

### **Ideas for addressing, gender, ethnicity and social class issues**

- Review the types of masculinity supported and promoted in schools and consider whether there is scope for intervention (e.g. un-gendering their views of reading/ writing). Explore ways of addressing boys' hyper-confidence and unwillingness to ask for help and encourage reflexivity among boys around issues of masculinity. Encourage boys' ownership of their own learning.
- Examine how (black) girls' assertiveness and confidence is interpreted by staff and experienced by girls. Explore ways of supporting non-traditional gender/class aspirations among girls and encourage reflexivity among girls around issues of femininity.
- Review the gender balance of pupils being referred to specialist support services (e.g. Connexions and to PRUs) and consider whether there are quiet or 'hidden' disengaged pupils who would benefit from such measures but who are being overlooked because current systems prioritise behavioural disruption as criteria for referral.
- Address racisms and racist bullying in school. Explore ways of preparing minority ethnic pupils for the labour market and how they might be prepared and reassured to navigate inequalities.
- Explore ways of providing working class pupils with key forms of social and cultural capital. Investigate how to increase pupils' sense of pride and worth in themselves, their schools and local communities. Review class cultures and ethos within schools. Explore how working class forms of knowledge, capital and skills might be explicitly valued and recognised within lessons (e.g. aspects of pupils lives, interests and experiences) and also how these might be valued and represented more generally in school.
- Explore ways of helping pupils to reflect on /develop reflexivity in relation to consumer identities, perhaps through citizenship education classes. This may necessitate also reflecting on corporate/private sector involvement in schooling.
- Establish pupil consultation as a mainstream, meaningful part of the running of the school. Provide the means to enable/ empower disaffected pupils in particular to get engaged in school decision-making and identifying issues that matter to pupils (e.g. around uniform, canteen food, provision of lockers were all raised by pupils in this study). Gewirtz (2001) suggests policy makers should 'develop decision-making structures and curricula which engage with and give voice to the diverse experiences and perspectives of working-class children and parents as well as their middle-class counterparts' (p. 377). Likewise Arnot *et al* (2004) suggest a range of practical ways in which schools might consult pupils about their learning.

- Ensure that schools have open, welcoming and non-elitist sixth forms that can appeal to a range of students across levels of achievement and subject areas.

### **Ideas regarding the curriculum**

- Expand the vocational curriculum. Explore links between local schools and colleges and/or develop consortia to deliver a wide range of vocational options (e.g. in engineering, IT, business and the arts alongside trade skills and hair/beauty). However, alongside this, the current lack of parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways must be addressed at a national level.
- Examine the scope for increasing interactive lessons and lessons incorporating practical, 'hands-on' elements.
- Ensure that the curriculum is (more) relevant to the everyday lives of students – both in terms of relating learning to the future world of work, but also recognising and valuing diversity within the curriculum (e.g. relating learning to working class and minority ethnic young people's lives).
- Review the gender balance of pupils on vocational courses and ensure that pupils are not channelled into gender and class stereotypic pathways. This will require some work to be undertaken to enable pupils to perceive a wider variety of options as both possible and desirable.

### **Ideas for creating positive home-school relations**

- Ensure there is swift, close and regular liaison between school and parent/s over attendance/absenteeism, completion of homework/coursework and low achievement. Ensure that sufficient detail is provided to parents, e.g. regarding disciplinary issues.
- Review how to make parents feel more comfortable coming into school and whether there is scope for outreach work.
- Provide support for parents about how to help their children plan for post-16.
- Establish regular contact with parents of disengaged pupils and consider creating opportunities for additional contact, e.g. through regular 'surgeries' or drop-in sessions.
- Ensure that communication from school to home is balanced to include good news along with the 'bad'.
- Ensure that all materials sent home are translated into community languages.

- Develop close links between the school and local community to build confidence in the school and raise its profile in positive ways.
- Provide support for families where they are concerned about their child's peer relations.
- Provide specific support, where appropriate, for minority ethnic families to understand and navigate the education system and ensure there is specialist support for refugee pupils (educational and pastoral).

### **Ideas for Careers Education and broadening pupils' horizons of choice**

- Tackle the 'wait and see' by helping pupils to develop range of options- so they know there are back-ups in place and are clear about these. Support pupils to make early applications to colleges to help them access their preferred course/ institution.
- Use careers education to share cultural and social capital among pupils and within local communities.
- Work with more complex understandings of pupils' aspirations.
- Explore ways to demystify FE and HE through the provision of knowledge, information and experiences. Ensure that university 'taster' courses and visits reflect a range of institutions (that are both aspirational and achievable).
- Foster 'hot knowledge' and reflection among pupils by inviting older siblings or young people from local area of a similar age/background to talk to small groups of pupils about their post-16 experiences of (the difficulty of) finding work and the requirements for securing apprenticeships and training. Introduce young people to a wide range of possibilities that are perceived by them as 'real' and achievable by making increased use of hot knowledge, e.g. inviting in a range of people, who pupils perceive to be 'like us', who have successfully followed different routes.
- Introduce young people to the possibility of non-stereotypical aspirations and support pupils to be able to pursue such options. For example, the EOC supports a new website aimed at young people and non-traditional occupations ([www.works4me.org.uk](http://www.works4me.org.uk)), which also contains details on non-stereotypical work experience as a useful starting point.
- Provide pupils and families with broader views of the range of possible jobs that particular subjects, like science, history and MFL can lead to.

### **Ideas for Connexions**

- Review the image of Connexions- how it is both promoted and interpreted/received. Review the explicit focus on post-16 education and/or how this is presented to pupils.
- Reduce self-referral and increase the amount of contact and entitlement of all pupils.
- Ensure all pupils experience 1:1 contact as well as group work. Ensure any truanting pupil is entitled to a Connexions PA. Resource the service adequately so that meaningful relationships can be built over time between PAs and pupils.
- Ensure that careers education is provided to all pupils from as early as possible. Ensure careers education is linked to subject options (and provide support in this to families too). Liaise with schools regarding the covering of different aspects of careers education.

### **Wider policy implications**

- Review, and increase, the amount of the EMA.
- Review HE funding policies- provide substantial grants, rather than loans, for less affluent/ non-traditional students.
- Develop policies that are based on more complex and sensitive understandings of working class, urban young people, particularly with regard to their identities, aspirations and the difficulties they encounter with schooling.
- Invest in supporting local communities out of poverty and provide more outreach and community work. Improve impoverished local areas, addressing crime and drugs and providing more activities and safe spaces for young people.
- Gewirtz (2001) suggests that, in order to tackle educational inequalities, policy should: 'dismantle the disparities of wealth and power and the hierarchies which structure schooling and employment that are largely responsible for the differential ability of middle-class and working-class children to succeed at school' (p. 376).

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