The London School of Economics and Political Science

A-level Engagement and Achievement in Inner London

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Declaration of originality

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PhD Abstract

Using ethnographic methods, my research investigates the "problem" of A-level underachievement in inner-city London, motivated by professional and personal concern about the consequences of underachievement. Whilst there is a long history and rich field of sociological research considering issues of educational engagement and achievement in relation to class, ethnicity, and gender (e.g. Willis, 2000; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Reay, 2006; Archer and Francis, 2007), very little research is focused on A-level students. At the time of starting my research, Inner London had seen dramatic improvements in its GCSE achievement and was the second-best-performing region in the country (out-performed only by Outer London). However, by several measures, it was the *worst*-performing region in terms of A-level achievement. This chimed with my professional experience in an inner-city London school achieving well above the national average in terms of GCSE results and far below the national average in terms of A-level outcomes. I carried out fieldwork in a school and a sixth form college, each in socio-economically deprived and ethnically diverse areas of inner-city London, and conducted in-depth interviews with 24 A-level students who had previously underachieved or were anticipated to underachieve. I draw on a range of sociological literature to understand my data, including using Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework, whilst also drawing on wider educational literature. I consider a wide range of issues but argue that students' learning careers and cultural capital are central to understanding their A-level engagement and achievement. My research makes a contribution to the sociological literature on education, drawing attention to the neglected and distinct educational phase of sixth-form.

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Beginnings

This research is the outcome of my longstanding interest in education inequalities along with my professional experience of working in post-16 education. When I completed my degree, I was thrilled to be offered work in an "Outstanding" school in the deprived inner-city borough of Tower Hamlets, a borough that was celebrated for what had been an impressive educational turnaround. This school largely served the borough's Bangladeshi community. When I was studying education inequalities as part of my sociology A-level in 2007, Bangladeshi students were one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in the country, with a very low percentage of Bangladeshi children achieving the GCSE benchmark. Within several years, and by the time I came to work in a school with a predominantly Bangladeshi intake, Bangladeshi students were one of the *best*-performing ethnic groups in the country. The school that I was working in had truly excellent GCSE results, particularly in the context of serving a very socioeconomically deprived area. However, despite the school's impressive GCSE performance, AS and A-level results were, on the face of it, shockingly poor. My departmental colleagues for the most part either denied the problem, possibly having accepted the school's own annual massaging of the results (for example, expressed in the very high proportions of students achieving "Pass" grades, without mention that these were often Es), or seemed completely resigned to it.

A little research demonstrated that poor A-level results were not just a problem at my school but a borough- and, indeed, region-wide problem. Inner London had seen dramatic improvements in its GCSE achievement and was the second-best performing region in the country (bettered only by Outer London). However, by several measures it was the *worst* performing region in terms of A-level achievement. There seemed to be little discussion of this issue, either by education researchers or by policy makers.

I have now experienced many A-level results days across several sixth forms in inner-city London. These bear little resemblance to the clichéd broadsheet results day front pages, which often feature blonde girls leaping delightedly on summer lawns. Whilst there are always pockets of joy, they are also often distressing and depressing days both for students and teachers, days of disappointment, readjusted aspirations, and shame. Whilst students may often overestimate how well they are likely to have done given their contribution of effort, results are also sometimes shocking to teachers: on one particularly memorable results day in one of the sixth forms in which I carried out my research, a social science subject saw 17 students – about a

third of entries – receive an AS grade U ("Unclassified") when the teacher had not predicted a single "fail" grade.

Like clockwork, alongside the doing down of students' achievements via complaints of grade inflation, A-level results day also sees well-meaning (and not so well-meaning) adults – often journalists and celebrities – advising teenagers that, actually, their A-level results are not terribly important. Whilst this may have been true for these relatively privileged and disproportionately privately educated newspaper journalists and TV personalities, it is not the case for disadvantaged, state-educated, inner-city students. A-level grades – and the opportunities that they open up or restrict – *do* matter, particularly for those who cannot rely on parents' financial assistance or social networks to make their way in life. What can be thought of as the "against the odds achievement" found in inner-city London has rightfully been much celebrated. However, by neglecting the issue of A-level underperformance and failure in inner-city London, we do a disservice to these students, whose lives may take a different course as an outcome of their results.

A concentration of poor A-level achievement and failure is troubling. As well as individual students potentially having to adjust their expectations and aspirations in terms of their subsequent destinations, and those further ahead, it is likely to result in a waste of talent, as young people drift into possibly inappropriate courses at lower-ranking institutions, or end up NEET – not in education, employment, or training.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I will set the scene for my research. I will first explain England's education and assessment system, and commonly used accountability measures and benchmarks. I will then move on to discuss inequality in educational achievement at GCSE, as GCSE results are the primary lens through which differences in secondary educational outcomes are measured by the Department for Education and most education researchers. This discussion will involve looking at inequalities according to gender, free school meal eligibility, and ethnicity, as well as some of the ways these factors interact. I will then introduce the London context. I will outline a brief history of GCSE achievement in London, noting that improvements for London as a whole correspond to improvements in the GSCE achievement of many minority ethnic groups. Finally, I will introduce the research "problem": Inner London's weak A-level achievement. I will finish the chapter with an outline of the thesis structure.

Educational assessment in England

The national curriculum in England consists of four "Key Stages", with external assessment taking place at the end of three of these: in primary school, at age seven (Key Stage 1) and age 11 (Key Stage 2), and, in secondary school, at age 16 (Key Stage 4). Students at most secondary schools follow at least the core of the national curriculum – academies do not have to follow the national curriculum but must teach a "broad and balanced curriculum". Independent schools have complete autonomy over the curriculum.

Key Stage 4 assessment takes place at the end of compulsory full-time schooling and comes primarily in the form of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, although some students may sit other Level 2 qualifications – so-called vocational qualifications – alongside these. In 2016, the last year capturing the GCSE achievement of participants involved in my research, the mean number of GCSEs sat was 8.6 (Department for Education, 2017a), with nearly all pupils sitting English, maths, and at least one science option, alongside a combination of other subjects from the around 50 GCSE subjects available. Students involved in my research studied the pre-2014 national curriculum. The current national curriculum was launched in

schools in September 2015, and first examined in 2017. The key changes were the removal of coursework in most subjects and a fully linear structure, with exams sat at the end of the two-year course.

GCSE achievement is possibly the most commonly used measure of educational outcomes in the UK, and, for a long time, there was a widely understood benchmark for considering group differences in educational achievement: the percentage of pupils achieving 5 A*- C grades, including maths and English. This headline measure was replaced in 2016 by Attainment 8, Progress 8, Attainment in English and maths (A*-C), and English Baccalaureate (EBacc) entry and achievement[1]. Attainment 8 measures the achievement of a pupil across eight qualifications including mathematics (double weighted) and English (double weighted), three further qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure (history, geography, the sciences, and a language), and three further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or any other non-GCSE qualifications from a Department for Education (DfE) approved list. Each individual grade a pupil achieves is assigned a point score, which is then used to calculate a pupil's Attainment 8 score. The Attainment 8 measure is seen to improve on the previous benchmark through including a broader range of subjects and ending the incentive to focus on C/D borderline students as every grade counts. The changes to headline measures accompanied a change to grading: A*-G was replaced by 9-1 for 2017 English and maths results, and all other subjects in 2018. Progression to Level 3, including A-level, requires students to have achieved sufficiently at Level 2, which generally means having achieved at least 5 GCSE passes (9- 4, or A*- C under the previous system) including English and maths.

A-levels (formally, General Certificate of Education Advanced Level) are academic, Level 3 qualifications, generally regarded as the "gold standard". Students typically choose four, generally selecting from around 12-20 subjects offered by schools. From 2000, A-levels had been examined over two equally weighted years: Advanced Subsidiary (AS) exams were sat at the end of the first year, these counting as a stand-alone qualification and contributing 50% to the final grade. Generally, students then "dropped" one subject after the first year. A-level reforms were announced in 2014, in a response to what the Conservative Education Secretary saw as "the pernicious damage caused by grade inflation and dumbing down" (Gove, 2014). When the new AS and A-levels were introduced in September 2015 (rolling out over four years), they were decoupled. Whilst AS levels still exist as stand-alone qualifications, they no longer

[1] See Gillborn (2014) for a critique of the introduction of the EBacc as a measure of success.

contribute to the final A-level grade. In a return to the pre-2000 system, assessment is now mainly by exam, at the end of two years – it is linear rather than modular – and many students now start with three subjects. These reforms affected students at one of my research sites.

Inequalities in educational achievement at GCSE in England

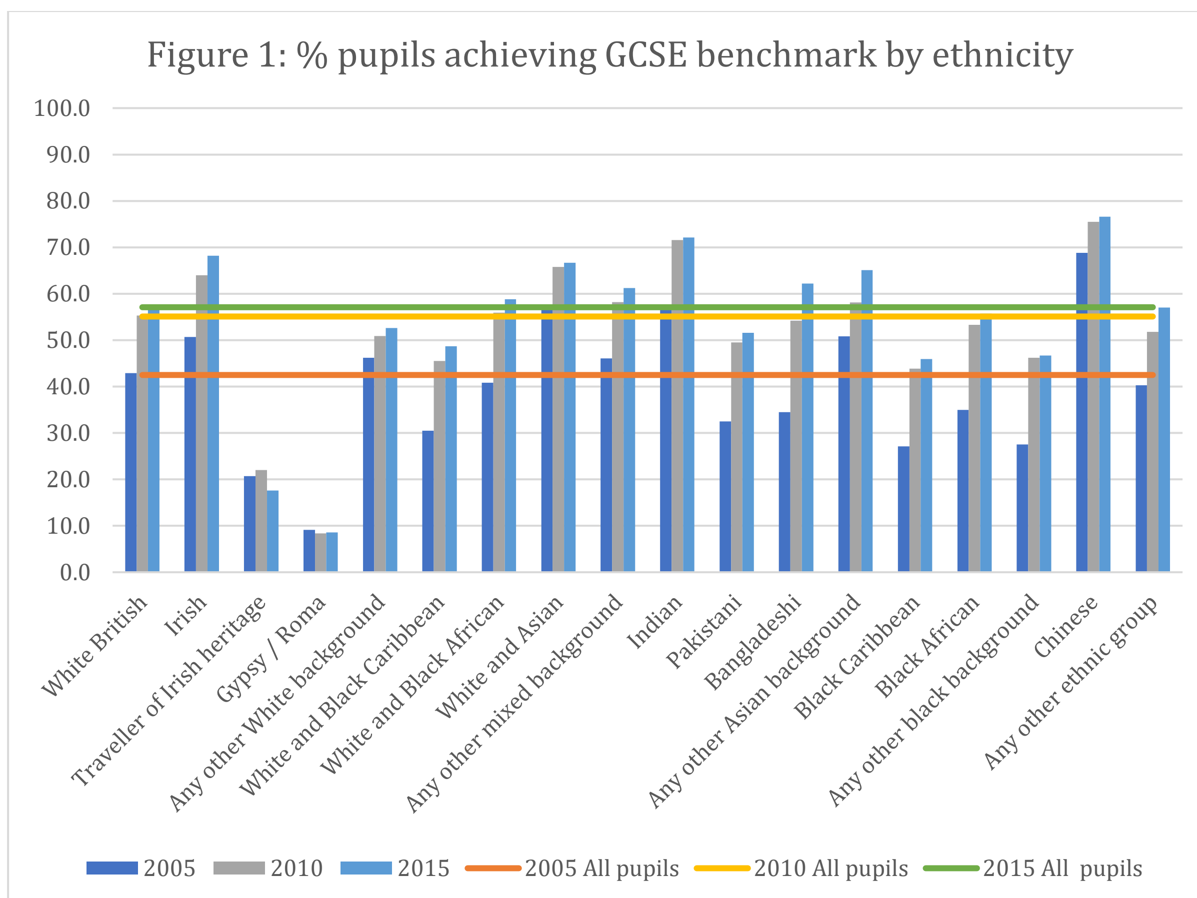
Observable variations in educational achievement along lines of class, ethnicity, and gender have long been recognised in England. For several decades now there has been concern about the issue of educational "underachievement". West and Pennell (2003) note that the concept lacks clarity and can be understood in a variety of different ways, but a common sociological approach is to consider inequalities between groups of students. Achievement "gaps" between different groups exist from a very early age and can be observed at each Key Stage. Whilst some patterns have shifted over time, certain education inequalities have been enduring. There has been some concern over the "gender gap" since the publication of league tables began in 1992, these breaking results down according to gender (Archer and Francis, 2007). This data suggested that girls were making progress towards matching boys' achievement in maths and science, and were out-performing boys in some other subject areas, causing a "furore" in the national media (ibid). In 2014/15, the final year employing the traditional GCSE benchmark, 61.8% of girls achieved the benchmark, compared to 52.5% of boys (Department for Education, 2016a), and girls tend to do better than boys in all GCSEs, including in subjects traditionally thought of as male, such as Computing (Bramley et al., 2015). In 2018/19, the last year national exams were held, girls did better than boys across all headline measures (Department for Education, 2020a).

A relationship between social class and educational achievement is found throughout OECD countries but is particularly strong in the UK (Clifton and Cook, 2012). Indeed, social class is the *most* powerful predictor of educational achievement in the UK (Perry and Francis, 2010). Official statistics and reports relating to educational outcomes employ free school meal (FSM) registration data as a proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage. The DfE now reports on the achievement of pupils eligible for FSM and "disadvantaged" pupils: all those known to have been eligible for FSM in the past six years along with pupils who have been looked after children – children who have been in the care of the local authority. In January 2016, 14.2% of pupils in England were eligible for and claiming FSM (Department for Education, 2016b). By January 2021, this was 20.8% of pupils (Department for Education, 2021).

FSM eligibility is a fairly coarse indicator of deprivation, not taking into account, for example, family size. Royston et al. (2012) estimated that around 700,000 children living in poverty in the UK were ineligible for FSM, and in 2020 the Child Poverty Action Group (2020) estimated this figure to be 1.2 million.

Imperfect as a proxy for deprivation, FSM registration is clearly even more problematic as a proxy for social class. However, it is sometimes used as such, particularly in terms of media coverage around underachievement, with "working-class" often used as a shorthand for this group (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). The annual publication of official education statistics employs FSM registration data, with national data based on parents' occupational categories not readily available: pragmatism encourages its usage for the consideration of socioeconomic differences, including here. There remains a stubborn and considerable achievement gap between FSM-eligible children and their non-FSM counterparts. In 2014/15, only 33.1% of children eligible for FSM achieved the GCSE benchmark, compared to 60.9% of non-FSM children (Department for Education, 2016b). Whilst the headline measures have changed, in 2018/19 the gap index between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils remained stable (Department for Education, 2020a). This has serious implications for the life chances of these disadvantaged pupils.

With regard to ethnicity and achievement, the data reveals complex and shifting patterns. Once, talking about minority ethnic school children was associated with "underachievement, rising exclusions and low aspirations" (Mirza, 2006: 137). However, by 2015, many groups outperformed White British children. Figure 1 demonstrates the considerable variation by ethnic group in the achievement of the GCSE benchmark up to 2015, the final year of the traditional GCSE benchmark, as well as how the performance of different groups has changed over time.



(Sources: Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Department for Education, 2013a; 2016b)

As can be seen in Figure 1, in 2005 there were a number of ethnic groups outperforming White British pupils in terms of achievement of the GCSE benchmark. Employing the categories and descriptors used by the DfE, these were Irish, any other White background, White and Asian, any other mixed background, Indian, any other Asian background, and Chinese pupils. On the other hand, there were a number of groups performing less well than White British pupils in the achievement of the GCSE benchmark: Black Caribbean, Black African, and other Black background pupils, White and Black Caribbean pupils, White and Black African pupils, Pakistani pupils, and Bangladeshi pupils. Black Caribbean pupils were the worst performing group aside from Traveller and Gypsy Roma children[2].

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[2] These pupils are excluded from the analysis due to both small numbers, and the unique circumstances of these groups: mobility is a key feature of these communities, and children will often attend multiple different schools within the school year. Attendance is identified as a major problem for both mobile and settled groups (Wilkin et al., 2010), and achievement is far behind that of all other groups.

By 2010, there was an increase in the percentage of all pupils achieving the benchmark – from 42.5% to 55.1%. There was also an additional minority group outperforming White British pupils: White and Black African students. We also see a considerable narrowing of the gap between White British pupils and most of the groups previously outperformed by White British pupils, with Bangladeshi pupils only very narrowly behind White British pupils – a 1.1 percentage point gap in the achievement of the benchmark.

By 2015, whilst White and Black African students were very slightly behind White British students, Bangladeshi students were ahead – as they have been since 2011. We see a very slight increase in the gap between White British and both Black Caribbean and Pakistani pupils, but a narrowing of the gap for Black African pupils to less than 1 percentage point, with this group having outperformed White British students in 2013 and 2014.

As previously noted, in 2016 the GCSE benchmark was replaced by a series of new headline measures, including Attainment 8, an improved measure. According to the most recent data that captured the achievement of any of my participants (2015/16 results), White British children were performing just below average at GCSE, with 10 other ethnic groups reported in the data – Irish, White and Black African, White and Asian, any other mixed background, Indian, Bangladeshi, any other Asian background, Black African, Chinese, and any other ethnic group – achieving higher Attainment 8 scores (Department for Education, 2017a). This remained the same in the 2018/19 data, with Pakistani pupils' performance improving to equal that of White British students (Department for Education, 2020a).

We can now say that, on average, minority ethnic pupils outperform White British pupils at GCSE. This is despite the fact that there are higher rates of poverty among all Black and minority ethnic groups than among the majority White British population (Barnard and Turner, 2011). Recent analysis by Strand (2021) reports that the "overwhelming picture" is of minority ethnic advantage in relation to educational achievement at 16. The improved achievement of minority ethnic groups has been widely – if somewhat misleadingly – reported on since 2010, with headlines such as "Ethnic pupils go to top of the class at 16 as they overtake white Britons for first time" in the Daily Mail (Clark, 2010), and "White British children outperformed by ethnic minority pupils, says thinktank" in the Guardian (Press Association, 2013). Indeed, some sociologists, including David Gillborn (2021), have suggested that some of the coverage can be interpreted as suggesting that minority ethnic achievement has come at the expense of (poor) White pupils.

However, much like the idea that girls achieve highly and boys' achievement is weak, the notion of overwhelming minority ethnic success is simplistic. Not only are some minority ethnic groups (most notably, Black Caribbean pupils) still performing considerably below the national level, but the pre-eminence given to GCSE achievement may be distorting. Further, socio-economic and gendered attainment gaps need to be considered alongside ethnic differences, and the picture becomes gradually more complex as we consider the interaction of these different characteristics: an understanding of educational inequalities requires an appreciation of intersectionality.

The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how different inequality producing structures – race, class, gender etc. – intersect to produce specific forms of disadvantage or oppression. Intersectionality involves recognition that "a wide range of different experiences, identities, and social locations fail to fit neatly into any single "master" category" (McCall, 2005: 1777). In the context of education research, this means seeking to understand how intersections of social class, ethnicity, and gender – as well as, possibly, other aspects of identity, for example, sexuality, disability, and geographical location – interact in shaping young people's experiences of education, relationships to it, and educational outcomes.

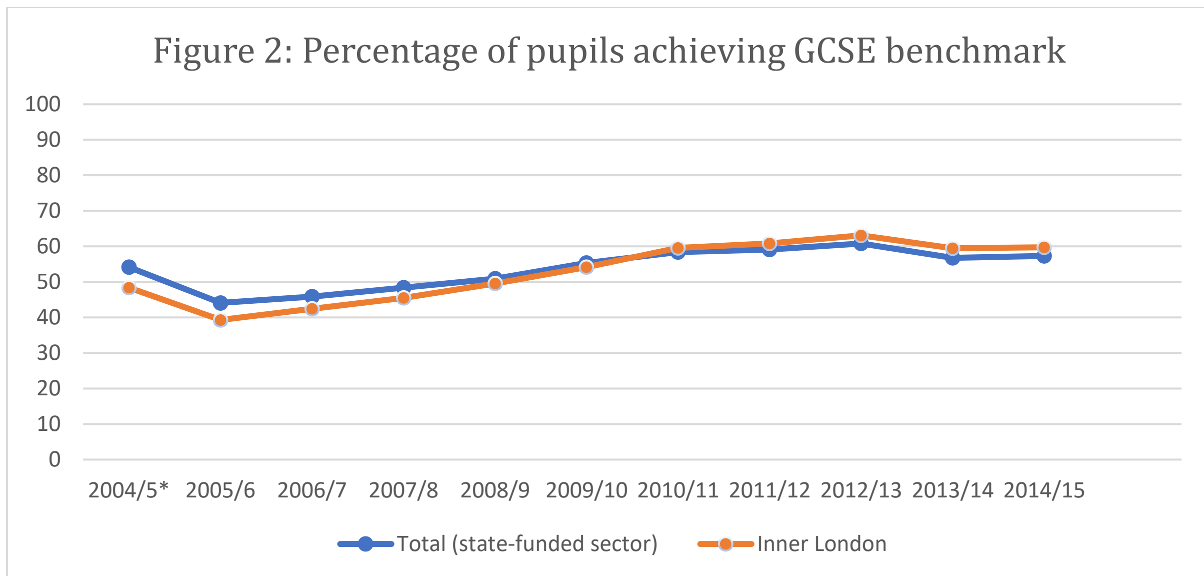
According to the 2014/15 data (Department for Education, 2016b) whilst, overall, a smaller percentage of both Pakistani and Black Caribbean students achieved the GCSE benchmark than White British students, both Pakistani girls and Black Caribbean girls outperformed White British boys, and both male and female FSM-eligible students from these minority groups outperformed their White British counterparts. The salience of FSM eligibility appears to vary between ethnic groups. As noted by Modood, "Ethnic group membership, then, can mitigate or exacerbate class disadvantage" (2004: 91). For Chinese pupils, the gap between FSM- and non-FSM-eligible pupils in the achievement of the benchmark was only 2.8 percentage points. In contrast, we see highly polarised achievement for White British pupils, with a gap of 33.2 percentage points – the largest gap for any ethnic group aside from Irish pupils. Whilst in every ethnic group a higher percentage of girls than boys achieved the GCSE benchmark, the size of the gap varied considerably between ethnic groups: the smallest gap was for Irish pupils (3.5 percentage points), and the largest was for Black Caribbean pupils (13.1 percentage points), followed by Chinese pupils. Whilst Chinese boys were the highest performing male group, there was a significant gap – 12.5 percentage points –between them and their female counterparts.

Looking at the 2015/16 average Attainment 8 score per pupil (Department for Education, 2017) reveals the same patterns: the FSM/non-FSM achievement gap was largest for Irish pupils (16.9), followed by White British pupils (15.2), and smallest for Chinese pupils (3.6), followed very closely by Bangladeshi pupils (3.7). This remained similar in 2018/19 Attainment 8 scores (Department for Education, 2020), although the smallest gap was for Bangladeshi pupils. In relation to ethnicity and gender, in 2015/16 we see the smallest gender gap between Bangladeshi pupils and the largest between Black Caribbean pupils. In 2018/19, the smallest gender gap was for Chinese pupils, and the largest was for pupils from "other" Black backgrounds.

Schooling and achievement in Inner London

Some years ago, it appeared that there was "real cause for alarm with regards to schooling in London" (Wyness, 2011). Average test performance was lower than elsewhere, and certain problems, whilst not unique, were more concentrated and of much greater intensity in London (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), in part because of "pupil characteristics". Pupils in London are disproportionately more likely to be poor than those in the rest of the country – in 2015, 29.6% of state-funded secondary school pupils in Inner London were eligible for and claiming FSM, compared to an England average of 13.9%. In 2019, this figure was 24.7% compared to an England average of 14.1% (Department for Education, 2019). There is also a far higher proportion of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) – 49.7% of Inner London secondary school pupils, compared to an England average of 15% (Department for Education, 2016c).

However, despite London's higher proportion of pupils with characteristics traditionally associated with educational disadvantage, as shown in Figure 2, by 2011/12 Inner London was outperforming the national average for the state-funded sector in the achievement of the GCSE benchmark. By the time I came to undertake my research, London was the best-performing region in the country at GCSE, with many London schools "among the best urban schools in the world" (Husbands, 2013).



(*2004/5 figures not comparable to other years – achievement of 5 A*- C not including maths & English, which is unavailable. Data sources: Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Department for Education, 2014b; Department for Education, 2016b)

In 2015/16, only two out of the thirteen Inner London local authorities (Lambeth and Lewisham) performed below the average Attainment 8 score per pupil for the total state-funded sector in England, and three – Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster – had average Attainment 8 scores in the top 10% of all local authorities in the country (Department for Education, 2017a).

That GCSE achievement is not only better than would be predicted given pupil characteristics but now better than the national average in *actual* terms presents what has been dubbed the "London advantage" (Wyness, 2011). Whilst some have attempted to attribute the improvement in London schools to gentrification, with more advantaged and higher-achieving pupils displacing disadvantaged ones, this does not stand up to examination. The strong educational performance found in London is in part an outcome of the smaller gap between FSM and non-FSM children in the achievement of the GCSE benchmark: 14.3 percentage points in Inner London, compared to 27.9 percentage points in England (Department for Education, 2016b). Further, we can see improvements according to just about every single metric, including those that are less susceptible to "gaming" by schools – a criticism of the old GCSE benchmark measure – suggesting that the improvement is "real" (Baars et al., 2014). The turnaround in education in London, particularly Inner London, corresponds with the aforementioned much improved achievement of many minority ethnic children – in 2016, 81.6% of Inner London

secondary pupils were non-White British compared to 27.9% in England (Department for Education, 2016c).

Whilst we have seen much improved and what is now impressive GCSE achievement in many Inner London boroughs, this "London advantage" was much less apparent in A-level achievement – indeed, it appeared that Inner London was the *worst*-performing region at A-level. When I was first poring over statistics relating to A-level achievement in Inner London, I found that Inner London was the region with the lowest average point score (APS) per student and per entry and the region with the smallest percentage of students achieving AAB or better at A-level (Department for Education, 2014c) – the kinds of grades required to access the most competitive degree courses and institutions.

In 2016, when I was midway through my fieldwork, Inner London remained the region with the lowest APS per entry and the lowest percentage of students achieving AAB or better. Whilst six of the twelve Inner London local authorities outperformed the England average, three local authorities – Islington, Lewisham, and Tower Hamlets – were in the bottom 10% of all local authorities for APS (Department for Education, 2017b). As well as the lowest APS, Inner London was the region with the lowest percentage of students achieving 3 A*-A or better (8.1% compared to 10.5% in the total state sector in England), and the lowest percentage of students achieving AAB or better (15.4% compared to 18.5% for the total state-funded sector). This data provides evidence of the way in which GCSE performance does not always translate into the expected achievement at A-level. We see a reversal of the "London advantage" seen at GCSE, with lower average point scores and lower percentages of students achieving the AAB+ and 3 A*-A measures compared to the national average.

Given that the majority of London's secondary school students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, I was concerned about what this meant in terms of minority ethnic A-level achievement. The DfE does not routinely release A-level results broken down according to pupil characteristics, as it does for GCSE data, as it claims that this information is not routinely collected for 16–18-year-olds. However, I submitted a series of Freedom of Information requests for GCE A-level broken down according to the same ethnic categorisations used for GCSE results. These demonstrated that a number of the minority ethnic groups outperforming White British students at GCSE were doing less well than White British students at A-level. For example, in 2015/ 16, several ethnic groups (White and Black African, Bangladeshi, Other Asian, and Black African pupils) that had outperformed White British pupils in terms of GCSE

benchmark achievement in 2013/14 did less well than White British pupils at A-level[3]. According to the 2019 data (only broken down by "major ethnic group"), White pupils outperformed other groups aside from Chinese and "Unknown" pupils (these likely to be pupils who previously attended independent schools) (Department for Education, 2020b).

This suggests that there may be different patterns of achievement at A-level compared to GCSE. This research seeks to makes a contribution to the field of education research through focusing on an under-researched area and addressing a specific "problem": A-level achievement in Inner London.

[3]Freedom of Information reference 0026395.

Aims and research questions

In an age of credential inflation, and with all young people now expected to be in some form of education or training until age 18, post-16 education is increasingly important to young people's futures. Despite this, the majority of research relating to achievement has considered achievement within compulsory schooling, neglecting the post-16 stage. This is unfortunate not just because of the importance of post-16 education but because, as I have shown, there may be different patterns of achievement at this stage. The focus on achievement at the end of compulsory schooling is potentially distorting, meaning that particular inequalities are overlooked. Inner London is of interest because of the paradox of GCSE achievement being better than the national average but A-level achievement worse. This research aims to explore why inner-city students who have achieved at GCSE may underperform at A-level.

Research questions were formed through several years' professional experience working in an inner-city sixth form, and an engagement with the literature:

1) What are inner-city students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, and how do these differ from GCSE?

2) What are the factors shaping these students' engagement with and achievement at A-level, and what role might class, ethnicity, and gender play?

Thesis structure

The aim of this chapter has been to provide the context for the chapters that follow, introducing the "problem" of A-level achievement in Inner London, where we see a reversal of the "London advantage" seen at GCSE.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature, starting with a discussion of the literature on engagement and student learning. I then introduce the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu, the entry point to discuss the literature on differential educational achievement. As a result of my interest in differences between students' experiences at GCSE and at A-level, I introduce the concept of "learning careers" and briefly review the literature on transition.

In Chapter 3, I introduce my research sites, discuss my methodology, and provide an overview of my interview sample. I discuss my positionality and the ethical considerations of my research.

Chapter 4 is divided into three parts. In Part I, I discuss students' choice of sixth form, and in Part II, I discuss their choice of A-level subjects. I argue that students often receive little in the way of information, advice, and guidance, and that students do not all have the same inclination or capacity to act as "skilled choosers". In Part III, I discuss the early days of sixth form at both sites.

In Chapter 5, I discuss what students experienced as the differences between GCSE and A-level: the volume of content and classroom time available, spoon-feeding, academic challenge, and the effort required to succeed. I argue that the strategies employed to secure school-level success at GCSE come at a cost, and that students' experience of a narrow curriculum and the pedagogical practices employed serve to disadvantage students at A-level.

In Chapter 6, I flesh out students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, discussing a range of issues, including the curriculum and knowledge, pedagogy, and student-teacher relationships. Throughout these different issues, we see the salience of students' cultural capital.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the "freedom" and responsibility of sixth form. In Part I, I discuss the freedom of sixth form, represented by the removal of uniform, free periods, and the possibility of lesson non-attendance. In Part II, I discuss the responsibility of sixth form: the expectation that students take responsibility for managing their own learning. I discuss students' approach to independent work and consider why students did not always engage in the academic labour required to succeed at A-level. I argue that students' prior schooling experiences and cultural capital provide the key to understanding their approach to independent work at A-level.

In Chapter 8, I discuss students' aspirations, which were notably high. I consider the influences on and meanings behind these aspirations, and consider why it is that these aspirations do not necessarily drive student achievement.

Chapter 9 concludes my thesis. I revisit my research questions and pull my findings together to address these. I briefly note the limitations of my research and, in the light of my findings, offer some suggestions for addressing the problem of A-level underachievement in Inner London.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the literature in key areas of relevance to my research. I will first discuss the mainly psychological literature relating to students' relationships with learning before discussing how identities may shape such relationships. I will then introduce the work of Pierre Bourdieu, using this as an entry point to consider the literature on differential educational achievement, focusing primarily on social class and ethnicity. This will be divided into several sections: the family and the home, institutional factors, and aspirations. Finally, I will discuss some of the literature on educational transition.

Engagement, self-regulation, and motivation and achievement goals

Educators and researchers have long recognised that people are active participants in their learning. Of interest in the context of my research is what this participation looks like and what drives it – whilst all students have made the choice to stay on in full-time education to study A-levels, student engagement is recognised as something of a perennial problem. Indeed, by the time students reach A-level, teachers want them to be self-motivated, independent learners – an approach to learning captured, in the field of psychology, by the concept of "self-regulated learning". Research from the field of motivation studies helps to illuminate student behaviour in relation to learning.

Engagement

Educational "engagement" is a multidimensional concept that helps to capture different elements of students' relationships with education. There are a range of different conceptualisations of engagement, and Appleton et al. (2008) provide a comprehensive overview of these. However, there is a reasonable level of agreement within the literature that student engagement consists of behavioural, affective, and cognitive components, even if these dimensions are labelled differently. As Trowler notes, "Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense-making as well as activity… Acting without feeling engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation" (2010: 5).

The behavioural component of engagement encompasses, for example, attending lessons, being on-task in class, resisting distraction in class, asking questions in class, and completing

homework (Johnson et al., 2001; Fredericks et al., 2004). Watkins and Noble (2013) note a relationship between corporeal habits and engagement, with what they describe as “stillness” – or bodily composure – affording a readiness to learn. This is one aspect of what they call the “scholarly habitus”. They argue that such habits tend to be embodied within the home and then applied within the classroom. That certain aspects of behavioural engagement are likely to be socialised within the home is a point also made by Calarco (2014), who found that parents have class-based understandings of “appropriate” classroom behaviour, which they transmit to their children. Appleton et al. suggest that “engagement seems to have a ‘rich-get-richer’ quality” (2008: 374), whereby students who demonstrate a high degree of behavioural engagement within the classroom seem to receive more support from peers and teachers, and this encourages further engagement. Those students who demonstrate weaker behavioural engagement may find that this leads to negative student-teacher relationships, further discouraging engagement.

The affective dimension of engagement involves finding interest and enjoyment in school work and regarding it as holding value (Conner and Pope, 2013), which may be influenced by whether students feel that education will personally benefit them (Johnson et al., 2001). This may be linked to, for example, local labour market conditions. The affective dimension may also relate to the feelings that the student has about the school, their teachers, and their peers (Dotterer and Lowe, 2011), and whether they experience a sense of belonging and membership in a school, the “belongingness hypothesis” positing that the desire to belong has extensive influences on cognition, emotion, and behaviour (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Such feelings may be influenced by factors including the perceived warmth and supportiveness of the school’s teachers (Finn, 1993), as well as the student’s ethnicity and the ethnic composition of the school (Johnson et al., 2001). Affective engagement may serve to provide the incentive for participation and persistence in academic endeavours (Finn and Zimmer, 2012).

The cognitive component of engagement involves students expending an intellectual effort to understand material and master skills (Fredericks et al., 2004). Blumenfeld et al. (2006) distinguish between “superficial” and “deep” cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement may be superficial when a student is using strategies such as mechanical rereading and underlining, with deep cognitive engagement involving a meaningful effort to understand, connecting new information with existing knowledge (Greene et al., 2004). These different strategies are likely to produce different levels of understanding, with shallow cognitive engagement likely to result in shallow knowledge that is context-dependent (Willingham, 2009). High levels of cognitive engagement facilitate the learning of complex material (Finn and Zimmer, 2012), so cognitive engagement may be particularly important by the time young people reach A-levels.

The behavioural, affective, and cognitive dimensions of engagement are synergistic, and, when they appear in isolation, may fail to yield positive outcomes. For example, students may demonstrate behavioural engagement without cognitive and affective engagement. This is, in effect, simply a performance – "doing school" – and is associated with higher stress, for example (Conner and Pope, 2013). Educational engagement is important in its own right, but it is also important in terms of its logical relationship with academic achievement (Marks, 2000), this supported by the research literature (Wang and Holcombe, 2010; Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Schnitzler et al., 2021). It is also the primary theoretical model for understanding school "dropout" (Appleton et al., 2008), suggesting that engagement is important for keeping young people in education. Further, engagement is malleable, so holds potential as a locus point for intervention (Wang and Degol, 2014). Unsurprisingly, engagement is influenced by school culture and pedagogy, engendered by particular environments and teaching practices (Watkins and Noble, 2013), but engagement is also related to issues of identity, discussed in the following section.

Self-regulation

Like student engagement, self-regulation is a further framework used to understand students' functioning and performance in academic contexts (Wolters and Taylor, 2012) and may be particularly important for students' work outside of the classroom. Whilst there are various definitions of what it means to be a "self-regulated learner", "a common conceptualization of these students has emerged as metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning" (Zimmerman, 1990: 4). Self-regulated learners engage in planning, self-monitoring, and behavioural control, and assess their performance in order to inform future learning (Pintrich, 2004). Self-regulation can be seen to have considerable overlap with the cognitive dimension of student engagement, and whilst some researchers have conceptualised self-regulated learning as the "highest form" of cognitive engagement, Li and Lajoie (2021) note that this fails to recognise the qualitative differences between the constructs, including that self-regulated learning is metacognitively governed. Further, theories of self-regulation emphasise both intrinsic motivation and student initiative (Zimmerman, 1990), neither of which are necessary for cognitive engagement. The concept of the self-regulated learner has much in common with what Watkins and Noble (2013) dub the "scholarly habitus" – the embodied, socialised capacities that orient students towards learning. The organisation of schooling is effectively predicated on the assumption that students will develop self-regulatory strategies, with increasing levels of independence expected as students progress (Martinez-

Pons, 2002). By A-level, some disposition towards self-regulated learning may be required for success, as students are expected to be engaged in considerable independent work.

Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) propose four stages in the development of self-regulatory skills: observation of these skills; imitation of them; internalisation of them; and, finally, self-regulation – employing these skills adaptively, in a range of contexts and circumstances. This social-learning-theory-informed approach recognises that self-regulation is socialised rather than naturally occurring and, therefore, the importance of young people having access to models of self-regulation. Whilst Schunk and Zimmerman note that some students may not have access to an exemplary model, they do not consider how this may be influenced by socioeconomic divisions. Martinez-Pons (2002) describes the "hidden curriculum" that exists in some students' homes, with parents modelling, facilitating, encouraging, and rewarding self-regulatory strategies. Again, no consideration is given to social class, despite a clear alignment between the practices that aid the development of self-regulated learning and middle-class culture (Vassallo, 2013). Further, the ability to control one's learning environment may well be linked to economic conditions and the home environment. As well as primary socialisation, self-regulated learning is also linked to prior learning experiences. Given the research interest in A-level, we might ask how students' previous learning experiences have shaped their orientations towards learning.

Motivation and achievement goals

The field of motivation is of obvious interest to education researchers, and achievement goal theory, which became prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, is a framework that is used to explain and research academic motivation (Anderman and Patrick, 2012). One of the most famous theorists in this field is Carol Dweck, now a well-known figure far beyond her academic field, and her work on mindset is discussed below. Dweck and her colleagues' research proposed that there are two main goals that individuals pursue in achievement situations, including within education: performance goals (also referred to as ego goals) and learning goals (also referred to as mastery goals). Performance goals are those where individuals "seek to maintain positive judgements of their ability and avoid negative judgements by seeking to prove, validate, or document their ability and not discredit it" (Elliot and Dweck, 1988: 5), whilst learning goals are those where individuals seek to improve their ability or master new tasks (ibid). In other words, performance goals are about the *demonstration* of competence, whilst learning goals are about the *development* of competence (Ames, 1992) and associated with intrinsic motivation (Heyman

and Dweck, 1992). Early work in this area suggested that learning goals were adaptive and would encourage high levels of effort and challenge-seeking, facilitating learning, whilst performance goals would be maladaptive, undermining the quality of learning (Dweck, 1986), and performance goals are associated with more shallow cognitive strategies (Greene et al., 2004). Achievement goal theory can be considered a qualitative theory of motivation, moving beyond a quantitative understanding of high vs low motivation to focus on the purposes behind achievement behaviour (Middleton and Midgley, 1997).

Later work in this field saw researchers arguing for a distinction to be made between performance-approach and performance-avoid goals, with research serving to validate this model (Anderman and Patrick, 2012). Performance-approach goals refer to students wanting to show greater competence than others, whilst performance-avoid goals refer to students wanting to avoid appearing incompetent (Middleton and Midgley, 1997). This approach/avoid distinction was then applied to learning (or mastery) goals, with the mastery-avoid orientation proposed (Elliot and McGregor, 2001). This referred to avoiding failure in relation to the demands of the task or one's own prior performance as opposed to in relation to others. This captures a student wanting to avoid *losing* their sense of competence, a construct positively associated with fear of failure (ibid). This produces a "2 x 2 achievement goal framework", which has attracted both support (Van Yperen, 2006) and some criticism. For example, it has been suggested that what has been identified as mastery-avoidance may indicate misinterpretation of the survey item on the part of participants (Ciani and Sheldon, 2010), and Anderman and Patrick (2012) note that further work is required in relation to this element of the framework.

The development of achievement goal theory to include the approach-avoidance distinction has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of students' achievement goals. In general, research has supported the broad hypothesis that learning goals predict a range of desirable educational outcomes, whilst evidence on performance goals is more mixed (Senko, 2016; Anderman and Patrick, 2012). Some research has found positive benefits to performance goals – for example, Harackiewicz et al. (1998) found performance goals to be associated with higher grades amongst college students – and it seems that many of the negative effects attributed to performance goals have, in fact, been found to be characteristics of *performance-avoidance* goals (Senko et al., 2011). Performance-avoidance goals tend to be associated with high anxiety, disorganised study habits, and help avoidance (ibid), as well as the greater likelihood of academic dishonesty (Anderman and Koenka, 2017).

Linked to motivation is "mindset", a concept most associated with Carol Dweck, who published a bestselling book on the topic (Dweck, 2006), catapulting the concept into the mainstream, and her TED talk on the topic now has over 13 million views. Mindset describes implicit theories about the nature of human attributes, including skills and intelligence, which guide our behaviour. Dweck distinguishes between a "fixed" and a "growth" mindset: whilst a fixed mindset holds that attributes such as intelligence are naturally determined and fixed, a growth mindset sees attributes as malleable and able to be developed through effort. Dweck notes that effortless achievement tends to be valorised:

> "As a society we value natural, effortless accomplishment over achievement through effort. We endow our heroes with superhuman abilities that led them inevitably toward their greatness. It's as if Midori popped out of the womb fiddling, Michael Jordan dribbling, and Picasso doodling. This captures the fixed mindset perfectly." (Dweck, 2006: 41)

Whilst normally characterised in these terms – fixed vs growth – mindset is conceptualised as being on a continuum (Dweck and Yeager, 2020). Mindsets can be regarded as the antecedent for achievement goals – conceiving of one's intelligence as a fixed entity encourages performance goals, whereas conceiving of intelligence as malleable is associated with learning goals (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Thus, students' mindsets may have important consequences for their approaches to learning, and interventions designed to encourage the development of a growth mindset have flourished. Such interventions may prove successful: a recent national experiment in the US (Yaeger et al., 2019) found that a growth mindset intervention improved adolescent achievement.

Whilst mindset theory has attracted criticism, much of this relates to some of the exaggerated claims made for both the strength of the relationship between mindset and achievement, and for the effectiveness of mindset interventions. Moreau et al. (2018) suggest that the harms of overstating certain individual factors involved in academic success, such as mindset, include opportunity costs and stigmatising those who are less able to achieve, whilst Sisk et al. (2018) found that the impact of mindset interventions on academic achievement was very weak. Whilst it is perhaps inevitable that academic research entering the mainstream is somewhat misrepresented, some of the blame lies at the feet of the researcher herself, with claims being made, for example, of mindset theory holding the key to achieving peace in the Middle East (Dweck, 2012). Such claims notwithstanding, mindset theory can be seen as offering the potential for understanding student responses to academic challenge.

Achievement goal theory and mindset theory offer valuable perspectives on student engagement and learning, and may help to explain certain academic behaviours which appear counterproductive. However, to date, most of the research in this area has been quantitative and from the field of psychology. Researchers within the field recognise that the inclusion of more qualitative approaches would be beneficial, particularly when considering diverse students (Urdan and Kaplan, 2020), and concerns have been raised that educational psychology tends to neglect issues related to social class (Reay, 2010; Vassallo, 2013) and, I would argue, social identities more generally. Jackson's research on "laddishness" represents a rare exception to the dominant quantitative literature in this area and demonstrates the value of combining sociological and psychological research and theories. Jackson (2006) explores achievement goal theory as an academic motive that sits alongside social motives for laddish behaviours and attitudes in school, identifying a number of what she terms "defensive strategies" used to justify poor academic performance. These include procrastination, the intentional withdrawal of effort, and avoiding the appearance of working – many of the same behaviours that characterise laddishness.

Identities

Linked to ideas of educational engagement is identity. Identity can be understood as referring to both individuals' internal states and what can be thought of as their performances in society (Gee, 2000), and it can be seen as constructed in relation to difference (Reay, 2010). Identity is a slippery and elusive concept (Wetherell, 2010), but, as argued by Moje, "whatever *it* is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it" (McCarthey and Moje, 2002: 228). This includes individuals' experiences of and engagement with education: how they feel about, act in relation to, and respond to education. Further, schools are the primary site where young people engage with difference (Reay, 2010), and adolescence represents a period of intensive work in terms of identity formation (Erikson, 1968), making the relationship between identity and education particularly consequential within secondary school.

Much research has considered how students' social identities, grounded in categories of social class, gender, and ethnicity, influence their experiences of education. Class, ethnicity, and gender are best understood as "integrally related" (Archer and Francis, 2007: 25), interacting in shaping students' educational engagement. Willis' (1977) classic study of White, working-class

"lads" demonstrates how his participants' classed and gendered identities shaped their "anti-school" behaviour, and served as "experiential preparation for entry into working class jobs" (1977: 57), with school work and academic labour positioned as effeminate. Many researchers have identified that academic achievement may be associated with femininity (for example, Epstein, 1998; Renold, 2001; Jackson, 2006). As a result of this, academic boys may be labelled with derogatory terms – "cissies" (Willis, 1997), "'swots', 'geeks', 'nerds' and 'squares'" (Renold, 2001: 373) – and boys may engage in a range of strategies, characterised by Jackson (2006) as "laddish" behaviour, to avoid such labels. Archer (2003) considers the classed, racialised masculinities of the Muslim boys in her study, which combined both "gangsta" discourses and religious identifications, elements of each potentially conflicting with engagement with schooling. This chimes with my own professional experience when working in a school largely comprised of Bangladeshi students. The most disruptive male students often refused to engage with female classroom teachers, claiming it "haram" –proscribed by Islamic law. This was clearly the cynical deployment of religious identification, never exploited by better behaved and more pious Muslim male students and never attempted with senior staff members. Archer et al. (2007) found that many of the minority-ethnic, working-class girls in their study described themselves as "loud" and embodied an assertive and strong femininity which clashed with dominant discourses of the ideal female pupil, bringing these students into conflict with teachers.

One aspect of identity is personal presentation or style, and many researchers have noted that young people's investments in and embodiments of style may influence their relationship with schooling. Skeggs (2003) notes that fashion choices operate as "condensed class signifiers" (2003: 10), and much may be read into young people's styles – for example, that young people do not value education (Hollingworth and Williams, 2009). Willis (1977) found that personal presentation was very important to the working class "lads" in his research, who, at the time, favoured long hair, platforms, and flares, and aimed for "maximum distinction from institutional drabness and conformity" (17), and dress style was a major source of conflict with teachers. Many decades later, Archer et al. (2007) found that their young, working-class participants were heavily invested in identity work which prioritised the consumption and performance of branded fashion – what they dubbed "Nike identities". These identities could bring young people into conflict with their schools and were implicated in educational disengagement. Kulz (2017) describes how, at the inner-city academy where she carried out her ethnography, "styles seen as affiliated with a gangster aesthetic… are vigilantly prohibited" (66). Whilst there may be safeguarding justifications for this, it likely also demonstrates how certain (Black-associated) aesthetics are seen to run counter to education. Other research has found that teachers may

judge students according to other aspects of their presentation, for example, styles of walking associated with certain parts of Black culture (Gillborn, 1990; Sewell, 1997). However, it is important to note that many of the students captured in this research had oppositional relationships with education, whilst my participants had chosen to remain in full-time education.

It is important to note the distinction between social identities and "learner identities" (Reay, 2010). Learner identities refer to how students see themselves as learners (ibid) and their approaches to learning (Archer and Francis, 2007), and there are both convergences and divergences between social and learner identities (Reay, 2010). Pollard and Filer argue that "the acquisition of formal knowledge and skills cannot be divorced from learners' attempts to make personal meaning of their lives" (2007: 444), suggesting the central importance of learner identities to the business of learning. As with social identities, learner identities are relational and are influenced by the home, school, and peer group (ibid). Whilst we cannot make assumptions about learner identities based on pupils' social categorisations, learner identities are inflected by class, ethnicity, and gender (Archer and Francis, 2007), and it may be more difficult for certain groups of students to inhabit and maintain positive learner identities. For example, Ingram (2009) found that the young men in her study experienced a tension between their working-class identities and successful learner identities, and this impacted them emotionally.

Students' learner identities are shaped by the school environment and processes within the school. The social class composition of the school has been identified as important for learner identities (Pollard and Filer, 2007). School processes of ability setting and assessment are consequential for learner identities, and Ball (1984) found that students developed "band identities", with pupils' behaviour changing according to their band. He attributed this to teachers' "band stereotypes" and the influence of these on how teachers responded to pupils. Kelly (2009) suggests that lower track students, labelled as low-achieving by the school, need to look elsewhere in order to gain a positive self-image, which is likely to lead to a decline in academic engagement. Researchers have noted how the large amount of testing students are subjected to in the UK is likely to have an important influence on learner identities (Reay, 2010; Hempel-Jorgenson, 2009). Reay and Wiliam (1999) found that students may categorise themselves in relation to testing regimes, one year six pupil sharing her fears that she would "be a nothing" in relation to her SATs performance. Reay (2005) suggests that one consequence of the assessment regime is the "fixing of failure in the working classes" (916), this suggesting that

the experience of failure may have such adverse effects on young people's learner identities that they disengage from education. Reay argues that, for working-class children, "failure looms large, and success is elusive" (2009: 400).

Factors involved in differential achievement

There is an enormous literature on differential educational achievement in relation to social class and ethnicity. This spans many decades, cuts across numerous disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and social policy, and encompasses a large multitude of often entangled factors. The work of Pierre Bourdieu, a dominant figure in the sociology of education, provides an excellent starting point in exploring this complexity, and his theoretical concepts have been employed by many seeking to understand and illuminate the processes behind education inequalities (for example, DiMaggio, 1982; Reay, 2001; Archer and Francis, 2007; Lareau, 2011).

Bourdieu's theoretical framework

Bourdieu's work provides a context for understanding how social class position shapes individuals' lives, connecting objective structural relations to subjective experience through the concepts of field, habitus, and capitals, which are best understood in relation to one another. The interaction of these guides action (or "practice") and can be expressed as a formula:

[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1986)

The "field" describes the context or environment in which social relations occur; examples of fields include education, art, law, and religion. These different fields have their own rules and require certain skills.

Habitus "designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination" (Bourdieu 1977a: 214). The habitus is generated according to social position, through socialisation and internalisation of one's position in the social structure, largely unconsciously, providing a "socialized subjectivity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 126). The concept of habitus thus represents an attempt to

reconcile sociology's structure/agency debate, with external structures internalised within the habitus and the habitus serving to structure: "the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions, and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production – and only these" (Bourdieu, 1980: 55). Whilst primary socialisation may be foundational, the habitus can change – it is not static but potentially subject to both reinforcement and transformation (Bourdieu, 1990). The habitus determines where and when we feel at ease: "when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

Whilst denying that habitus governs practice in a mechanically deterministic fashion, Bourdieu argues that the habitus guides an individual's actions and what they believe is or is not possible. So, for example, Bourdieu claims:

''...the negative predispositions towards the school which result in the self-elimination of most children from the most culturally unfavoured classes and sections of a class—such as self-depreciation, devaluation of the school and its sanctions, or a resigned attitude to failure and exclusion—must be understood as an anticipation, based upon the unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category, of the sanctions objectively reserved by the school for those classes or sections of a class deprived of cultural capital.'' – Bourdieu, 1977b: 495

Social position also influences the *capitals* – or the set of resources – available to the individual. The three main types of capital identified by Bourdieu are economic, social, and cultural – these assisting individuals as they interact with different fields. Economic capital requires no explanation. Social capital relates to an individual's social network and what can be extracted from this. It is more than just the number of connections that an individual has; the volume of capital held by each of these individuals must also be taken into consideration. Cultural capital is divided into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised.

Embodied cultural capital refers to the knowledge and skill one possesses that is accorded value within a field. Cultural capital is both passively inherited, quite unconsciously, through socialisation within the family, and actively acquired, involving "a labor of inculcation and assimilation" (Bourdieu, 1986: 18). This requires the investment of individual time and effort – "Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand" (Bourdieu, 1986: 18) – and involves some sacrifice. Bourdieu argued that embodied cultural

capital always “remains marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition” (1986: 18) – this suggests that formal education can never entirely overcome (classed) differences in early socialisation. Bourdieu saw embodied cultural capital as distinctive because it defies what he argues is the deep-rooted distinction between inherited properties and acquired properties, and, therefore, it “manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition” (1986: 18). Because the social origins of cultural capital are more disguised than is the case with economic capital, cultural capital is misrecognised as legitimate competence, and this serves to legitimise the existing social hierarchy.

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural products such as books, artwork, and musical instruments. Bourdieu (1986) makes the point that the possession of such goods requires economic capital, but their *appreciation* requires cultural capital.

Institutionalised cultural capital refers to its objectification in the form of academic qualifications. Bourdieu referred to the academic qualification as “a certificate of cultural competence” (1986: 20) and draws attention to the “social alchemy” that takes place whereby one’s examination performance, possibly on a single day,
“produces sharp, absolute, lasting differences” (ibid) providing an individual with the assurance of officially recognized competence. Institutionalised cultural capital is important because it facilitates the exchange of cultural capital for economic capital. Arguably, institutionalised cultural capital is simultaneously of increasing and declined importance – those without it are excluded, whilst credential inflation and the expansion of higher education means that what counted as institutionalised cultural capital in the past may no longer be regarded as legitimate, and its exchange value for economic capital is less reliable.

Bourdieu (1986) regarded economic capital as the root of all other types of capital: economic capital allows for the investment in the development of cultural capital and provides the basis for greater social capital as one’s social network contains more individuals with a high volume of capital. In the long run, investments in both cultural capital and social capital are then potentially rewarded through their conversion into economic capital.

According to Bourdieu, every individual has what we might think of as a portfolio of capitals – also characterised by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) as resembling poker chips. In an extended metaphor of life as a game, the piles of chips reflect the unequal distribution of capitals within a field, these both representing past experiences and orienting future strategies:

"Those who have lots of red tokens and few yellow ones, that is, lots of economic capital and little cultural capital, will not play in the same way as those who have many yellow tokens and few red ones" (Bourdieu, 1993: 34).

Within education, it is cultural capital which is of primary importance (although, of course, in the UK, economic capital can play a significant role). Whilst cultural capital is developed primarily within the family, it is demanded to succeed in the education system (Bourdieu, 1973): Bourdieu's work aids understanding of the relationship between a child's classed upbringing and their experience of schooling and seeming academic aptitude, with family background regarded as more important than "natural" ability (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts have been used in a wide range of contexts and subject to a variety of interpretations – indeed, the concept of cultural capital has recently been taken up by Ofsted, the schools' inspectorate, albeit in an entirely uncritical fashion. Both Bourdieu's concepts and their usage within the sociology of education have been subject to criticism. Heath et al. (1982) argue that "Bourdieu's theory is couched in obscure, ill-defined language" (88), and Elster (1981) suggests that this serves to disguise inconsistency of thought. Nash describes the concept of habitus as "ambiguous and overloaded" (1990: 446), whilst Jenkins (1982) claims that it is deterministic and circular. I would argue, however, that the habitus predisposes rather than determines behaviour and that some of the critiques do not recognise that the concept of habitus allows for both the idiosyncrasies of individual biography and for a degree of agency.

In terms of the usage of Bourdieu's framework within the sociology of education, Sullivan (2002) argues that the concept of habitus is theoretically incoherent and thus of no use to researchers. However, I agree with Maton, who observes that the concept proves both "revelatory and mystifying, instantly recognizable and difficult to define, straightforward and slippery" (Maton, 2012: 48). Its slipperiness may make it difficult to employ within quantitative research, but, I would argue, the concept is valuable for qualitative researchers. Turning to cultural capital, Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that too much education research has interpreted cultural capital as amounting to knowledge of "highbrow" culture and instead emphasise "micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (Lareau and Weininger, 2003: 569). This is a more useful understanding of cultural capital both because elite and middle-class cultural tastes have become more omnivorous (Savage et al., 2013) and because it appears as though "beaux arts" participation is less important for academic success than other activities and practices of socialisation such as reading (De Graaf et

al., 2000; Sullivan, 2001; Stopforth and Gayle, 2022) or cultural communication between parents and children – for example, discussions about school activities or books (Tramonte and Willms, 2010).

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts are valuable for thinking through the relationships between some of the different areas addressed within the guiding literature on differential achievement: the family and home learning environment; institutional factors; and aspirations.

The family: the home learning environment, parenting, and involvement in children's education

For Bourdieu, socialisation within the family shapes the habitus of the child, as well as the cultural capital that they inherit and acquire, and socialisation varies according to social class. Social class is, thus, central to educational outcomes. That the home and family life are of great importance – even central – to children's educational performance is well recognised, and is captured by the concept of the "home learning environment" (HLE). The HLE tends to refer to the quality of parent-child interactions, children's participation in learning activities, and the availability of learning materials (Lehrl et al., 2020). The impact of the HLE has been studied extensively, particularly in relation to early cognitive attainment – for example, early literacy and numeracy (Hartas, 2011) – and research has found the early years HLE to affect students' attainment as they progress through school (Melhuish et al., 2008; Sammons et al., 2015). Clearly, the nature of the home learning environment relates to a family's financial position – in Bourdieusian terms, economic capital – and I will first consider these issues: namely, the experience of poverty and access to resources for learning, including tuition. However, as outlined by Bourdieu, cultural capital is crucial. I will use Annette Lareau's Bourdieu-informed analysis of childrearing practices as the starting point for a consideration of how different childrearing practices provide differential educational advantages to children. Guided by this work, I will discuss language use, parental involvement in children's education, and home-school relationships, demonstrating that there may be inequalities in relation to each of these areas.

Economic capital

Economic capital matters, both because of how economic conditions impact upon a young person's readiness and ability to learn and because of access to resources to support education, including digital access and paid-for educational support. The relationship between poverty and poor educational outcomes is well known, and "Put simply, the poorer is a child's family, the less well they are likely to do in the education system" (Raffo et al., 2009: 342). Whilst arguing that poverty cannot be used as an excuse for reduced expectations of young people's capacities, Ball notes that "young people who are hungry, neglected, frightened or stressed do not learn well, and learning may not be a priority for them" (2013: 30). This suggests that poverty may influence students' motivation and engagement – Smyth and Wrigley (2013) note that poverty is a material issue that has nonmaterial effects. Sparkes and Glennerster (2002) note the relationship between low-income and poor health, and that illness is associated with high levels of absence and lower educational attainment. Ivinson et al. (2018) found that poverty is such a taboo that young people will often go to great lengths to attempt to hide it and, to make sure that they do not put additional pressure on their parents, absent themselves from enrichment activities and often do not eat properly. Hiding poverty may also entail missing school. The psychic energy of attempting to hide poverty, along with hunger and missed learning opportunities, clearly constitutes an educational disadvantage for young people living in poverty. Tuckett et al. (2021) find a considerable gap between economically disadvantaged A-level students and their peers. Whilst much of this is attributable to the gap in prior attainment – itself likely influenced by poverty – one seventh of the gap is unaccounted for, and this is likely to be the effect of poverty itself, at this particular stage. Particularly since the controversial removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance in 2011, sixth form students from poor families may feel under pressure to contribute financially to the household, pulling them away from their studies.

Learning resources are a key element of the home learning environment. For adolescents, lacking solitary space and a desk at which to complete homework is likely to be detrimental to scholarly activity (Watkins and Noble, 2013). This is likely to affect many young people in London: overcrowding disproportionately affects London, and there are systemic racial inequalities in overcrowding in London (London Assembly, 2022). Lacking access to resources such as books (Mills and Gale, 2010) and, increasingly, digital devices is also an issue. The Covid-19 pandemic brought the digital divide into stark focus as it became apparent that many young people lacked access either to a reliable internet connection or the digital devices needed to engage in learning from home. However, this was clearly an issue that existed prior to the pandemic, and access to the internet and a computer has long been, if not necessary for the completion of homework, certainly advantageous – Sammons et al. (2018) report that computer

usage with parents or for educational purposes is associated with improved educational outcomes. Wilkin et al. (2017) note that research on digital inequalities has moved away from a binary understanding of those with/without access to encompass a more nuanced understanding, noting that economic, social, and cultural factors shape access and usage. Paino and Renzulli (2012) propose a digital dimension to cultural capital and find computer proficiency to have both a direct and indirect effect on academic achievement, the indirect effect mediated through teachers' evaluations of students. A range of research has sought to apply Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the digital realm, finding continuity between access to, understandings, and use of the internet (Robinson, 2009; Danielsson, 2011; McGillivray and Mahon, 2021).

Those parents with the economic capital to do so are increasingly seeking paid-for add-ons to support their children's education (Ball, 2010). It is reported that 30% of young people aged 11–16 have received personal tuition, this rising to 48% in London (Jerrim, 2017), where private providers of supplementary schooling are highly visible. Private tuition is sometimes referred to as "shadow education", the term not only capturing how tuition will often mimic, or shadow, the curriculum of the school (Bray, 2017) but also how most of the UK private education market is hidden (Kirby, 2016). Minority ethnic pupils are more likely to receive tuition than White pupils, and, predictably, there are socioeconomic differences, with 35% of pupils from more advantaged households having received tuition compared to 18% of those from less well-off households (Jerrim, 2017). Further, more advantaged pupils are more likely to be receiving tuition in "additional" subjects such as languages, furthering their cultural capital as opposed to simply securing achievement, possibly demonstrating parents' concerted cultivation efforts. It is suggested that better-off families create a "glass floor" for their children through private tuition, helping to ensure that they do not underachieve (ibid), a practice which is not available to poorer families. Whilst the ability to hire a private tutor is clearly largely dependent on a family's economic capital, other types of parental involvement are much more related to cultural capital and "emotional capital", and also parental time.

Cultural capital

In what has come to be regarded as a classic study of childrearing, Lareau (2011) carried out research in the American Midwest with 88 children (Black and White), most of whom were fourth-graders (9/10 years old), and their families, from which 12 were selected for ethnographic observation. Across both ethnicities, Lareau identified how middle-class parents

help their children to develop the skills and attitudes associated with academic success, which she refers to as cultural capital. Lareau described middle-class parenting practices as "concerted cultivation", noting that middle-class parents complying with current professional standards deliberately try to stimulate their child's development and advance their cognitive and social skills in ways that will advantage them through education and into their adult lives. Lareau describes the hectic pace of the middle-class families' lives in vivid detail, with children's leisure activities prioritised and at the centre of family life. These children, she notes, learn to see themselves as special – and as entitled to adult time – and are also learning soft skills, such as managing an itinerary and teamwork, that will be valuable within middle-class work settings. Lareau discusses language use in the different families, describing how some middle-class families "use language as an end in and of itself. They enjoy words for their own sake, ascribing an intrinsic pleasure to them. They discuss alternate meanings of words. The parents use language as the key mechanism of discipline" (Lareau, 2011: 107). This leads children to develop a large vocabulary and adroit verbal interaction. The final dimension of cultural cultivation expanded upon is relationships with institutions, and Lareau describes how middle-class mothers modelled to their children interventionist approaches, not only securing adjustments for their children but teaching them to be assertive in their dealings with people in positions of power.

Unlike middle-class parents, who engaged in concerted cultivation, involving deliberate efforts and a relentless childrearing focus, working-class parents, faced with the challenges and struggles of life on a low income, tended to facilitate the "accomplishment of natural growth" of their children, primarily concerning themselves with keeping their child safe and enforcing discipline. Lareau found that working-class children have much more freedom than middle-class children to organise their free time, which is separate from adults' worlds, and informal, impromptu outdoor play is common. In working-class families, language is used in a much more functional fashion than is found in middle-class families: sentences tend to be shorter and words simpler, and children are more likely to be issued directives as opposed to parents negotiating with them. The effect of this is that "language serves as a practical conduit of daily life, not as a tool for cultivating reasoning skills or a resource to plumb for ways to express feelings or ideas." (Lareau, 2011: 146). Finally, whilst middle-class parents teach their children to deal with institutions with confidence, working-class parents tend to show deference and remain distant.

These childrearing practices – concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth – are aspects of the habitus of the families within the study, and Lareau stresses that one is not

morally superior to the other. However, the outcome of these different approaches to childrearing is the transmission of differential advantages to children, with middle-class children having larger vocabularies and greater verbal agility, familiarity with abstract concepts, and greater ease with authority figures. Lareau notes that middle-class and working-class families differed in the degree of continuity between the culture of the home and the standards encoded in the school. All of these differences provide middle-class children with advantages when compared to their working-class counterparts. In follow-up interviews, once those who had been involved as children reached age 19, Lareau (2011) found that the importance of social class persisted, with middle-class parents continuing in their patterns of concerted cultivation with their children. Whilst working-class parents cared deeply about their young adult children, they did not have the same resources to support them. Lareau notes that parental interventions can be vital for managing a variety of aspects of young people's secondary school experiences, including subject selection and university applications, and middle-class parents hold much more detailed knowledge and understanding of the workings of education.

Parent-child interactions are crucial for children's language development, and Lareau's observations about language use are similar to those made by Basil Bernstein, a British sociologist working at a similar time to Bourdieu. Bernstein's (1971) sociolinguistic theory proposes that speech is shaped by social class conditions. Middle-class speech tends to use an "elaborated code" – it is explicit and universalistic – whilst working-class speech tends to use a "restricted code" – it is implicit and particularistic. Bernstein identified that, because of the "discrepancy in the meanings and their linguistic realizations" (1970: 114) between the home and school, working-class children tend to underachieve, with the restricted code limiting their ability to reach their innate potential. Like Bourdieu, Bernstein recognises that underachievement is often a consequence of the interaction between children's classed background and the organisation of schooling. Bernstein's theory was subject to much criticism, with some arguing that it represented a deficit account, a charge that he rejected. Despite such criticisms, his theory has remained influential, and there is reasonable evidence for speech differences of the kind described by Bernstein, even if "elaborated" and "restricted" represent ideal types (Nash, 2010). However, whilst Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory may well have validity in terms of explaining working-class underachievement, it is probably of less relevance to A-level achievement, with those young people operating with a "restricted code" likely filtered out at GCSE. Whilst, certainly, differences in language use remain at A-level, these are not necessarily categorisable according to the elaborated/restricted dichotomy. Rather,

vocabulary and ease of usage – “flair” – become important, at least in literature-based subjects, and this might be better understood in terms of cultural capital.

Parental involvement in children’s education

Much research has demonstrated the impact of parental involvement in children’s education on their achievement, and it is increasingly expected that parents *should* be involved. Ball (2010) has suggested that we have seen a “scholarisation of childhood”, which constitutes a blurring of the boundary between the private domestic sphere and the public sphere of schooling, and Reay (2008) notes the paradoxical situation of much of the public sphere being privatised, “while the private sphere of the home is increasingly being publicly regulated and activities within it held up for scrutiny and judgement” (Reay, 2008: 642). Whilst parental involvement is much discussed, it is important to note that such involvement will tend to be *mothers’* labour, with fathers’ involvement more likely to amount to “helping out” (Reay, 2005). As Chapman and Bhopal remark, “when we speak about ‘parental involvement’ the expectations are set so low for men that we really do mean mothers” (2012: 569). Against a backdrop of what can be seen as the vilification of the working class, many researchers have identified pathologising discourses suggesting that working-class parents lack concern about their children’s education (Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2006; Reay, 2008). In fact, research has demonstrated that parents of all backgrounds care about their children’s education. However, parents’ *ability to assist* with their children’s education, and the form their assistance takes, is dependent on their ability to strategically deploy the forms of capital available to them.

Whilst the Department for Education’s homework guidelines were scrapped in 2012, statutory guidance states that the home-school agreement should contain “what is expected from parents and pupils in relation to homework” (Department for Education, 2013). Parents’ ability to productively support and assist their children with school work is, unsurprisingly, dependent on their level of education and own cultural capital, and this tends to disadvantage working-class children and those from certain minority groups. Research has found considerable variation in how parents support their teenagers with homework, with some differences according to social class (Solomon et al., 2002; Lutz and Jayaram 2015; Fitzmaurice et al., 2021). Whilst Solomon et al. (2002) found that “homework help” was associated with conflict and anxiety for both working-class and middle-class parents, it was unemployed parents who were most likely to consider themselves unable to adequately support academic work. Gillies notes that whilst homework may offer middle-class mothers an opportunity to bond with their child, “For working class mothers it was more likely to represent a site of conflict, uncertainty and

vulnerability" (2006: 288). Hutchinson (2012) argues that mothers' support for homework both draws on and reinforces cultural capital within families, suggesting that both the experience and the profits generated will be unequal. Research has tended to find that parents reduce support as their children age, as would be expected, and it is possible that, by the time children reach sixth form, parents no longer see the need for involvement. Regardless, parents are unlikely to be able to academically assist their children with A-level work unless they have above A-level education themselves, and even taking on a monitoring role may prove more difficult for certain groups of parents, either because of time or because of understanding of the education system.

Whilst much research considers the importance of cultural and economic capital, a number of researchers draw upon the concept of "emotional capital", a dimension missing from Bourdieu's work, first developed explicitly by Nowotny (1981) and referring to the emotional resources available to those with whom an individual has affective ties. Reay (2004a) found that mothers' involvement in their children's schooling was an intensely emotional experience: "Guilt, anxiety and frustration, as well as empathy and encouragement were the primary motifs of mothers' involvement" (61). Whilst she found that emotional investment varied little according to social class, working class mothers' lower levels of cultural, social, and economic capital, along with often dealing with a personal history of educational failure, made it difficult for them to provide the benefits of emotional capital to their children, and did not generate the same academic profit as middle-class mothers' investments. However, Gillies notes that the emotional capital of working-class mothers may be primarily focused on the short-term, aiding their children's "day to day survival at school" (Gillies, 2006: 285). For the working-class parents in Gillies' research, "formal education was viewed from a distant position, characterized by a desire for their children to do well, but contained by resignation and realism" (Gillies, 2006: 287). O'Brien notes that whilst it is "a truism that money cannot buy love" (2008: 145), mothers' capacity to care and support their children's schooling is supported by their possession of other capitals, and activating emotional capital without access to other capitals requires far more of these mothers.

Home-school relationships

As noted by researchers in this area, "a vocal consensus on the importance of close, cooperative and congenial family-school relationships exists among educational professionals…[and] thoroughly permeates educational research, policy, and practice" (Weininger and Lareau, 2003: 380). In research commissioned by the DfE, Goodall et al. note that the "more parents are engaged in the education of their children, the more likely their children are to succeed in the

education system" (2011: 16), identifying home-school links as an important feature of this. There is a considerable body of research examining home-school relationships, and much of it has sought to problematise normative expectations about parental involvement as well as common-sense assumptions about both non-involvement and the "effectiveness" of parental involvement.

Home-school relationships may be consequential because parents and teachers can align to increase levels of social control for children, and parents can provide timely and targeted support for teachers if they are well-informed about what is going on in their child's schooling (Hassrick and Schneider, 2009). Teachers want parental involvement in schooling and may interpret failure to attend parent-teacher meetings as a sign that parents do not value education (Lareau, 2011). Further, teachers may blame parents for not being more interventionist with their children's schools, shifting responsibility from professional educators to parents (ibid), this a tacit acknowledgement that parental involvement may encourage teachers to work harder on behalf of a student. Teachers may also be more flexible with the children of involved parents. Calarco's (2020) ethnographic research in an elementary school in the US found that teachers selectively enforced rules using evidence of what she describes as "helicopter" parents – highly involved, middle-class, White parents – to determine which students should be granted leeway with rules. This resulted in inequalities in the punishment of students and in their school experiences more broadly. Whilst the American schooling context differs from that of the UK in that US schools are more likely to be dependent on parents' provision of supplemental funding, making schools "privilege-dependent" (ibid), similar patterns can be found in the UK: Kulz's ethnography of a celebrated London academy described the preferential treatment of middle-class pupils in relation to disciplinary matters, a teacher commenting "If Mummy and Daddy have a direct line to the top, that can play a role" (2017: 90).

Involvement with children's schools may vary between groups because of differences in levels of understanding of the education system and parents' confidence regarding involvement. In terms of parents' understanding of the education system, parents may hold misguided assumptions about what it means to do well. For example, Bhatti (1999) found that if parents had attended school in the Indian subcontinent, where they would not be "promoted" to the next class unless they had passed the annual examinations, they often presumed that their children progressing upwards through the school meant they were doing well academically. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) identify a number of potential barriers to parental involvement in their children's education, one of which is parents' perception of invitations for involvement,

with parents more likely to be involved if teachers actively encourage involvement and are welcoming to parents. This may be particularly important for parents who lack confidence due to their own negative experiences of schooling. Crozier and Davies (2007) note that schools' expectations of parents are often implicit, and, without the necessary cultural capital, parents may be unaware of these expectations. They found that the Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage parents involved in their research did not see the need to visit their children's school, believing that if there was any "problem", the school would initiate contact, or they would hear about it through the community. This led to teachers and educational professionals regarding such parents as "hard to reach". However, Crozier and Davies argue that, in fact, it was frequently the schools themselves inhibiting parents' access.

Lareau (2011) noted that the working-class parents in her research sought to maintain a separation from their children's school rather than forge the interconnectedness pursued by parents engaged in concerted cultivation. Wilson and Worsley (2021) applied Lareau's typology of childrearing to explore disadvantaged British mothers' experiences with their children's schools. They found that whilst parents were able to engage with primary schools, where they felt an alignment of values of support and nurture for their children, they experienced discomfort in engaging with secondary schools. This was in part because of the perception of secondary schools' values being organised around targets and rigid systems, and also because they lacked the cultural capital to effectively navigate the secondary school system. The consequence of this was that parents withdrew from their children's education at secondary school, limiting communication with the school. This may well have implications for parents' engagement with sixth form, particularly where students have joined a new institution. Gillies (2006) found working-class and middle-class parents to have different orientations towards involvement with their children's schools, with working-class parents more likely to step in when teachers presented accusations of bad behaviour or evidence of academic failure, whilst middle-class parents were more likely to identify problems themselves and intervene accordingly. Whilst working-class parents interpreted a lack of communication from teachers as a success, middle-class parents actively monitored and regulated their children's schooling. Hanafin and Lynch's research in Ireland found that for working-class parents, communication with their children's teachers was "commonly spoken about as inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding, and frightening" (2002: 41), and Gillies (2006) found that working-class mothers often felt powerless in negotiations with teachers.

Research investigating Black parents' involvement with their children's schools has found parents acutely aware of the racism faced by Black children. Vincent et al. (2012) carried out

research with Black Caribbean middle-class parents, applying both a Bourdieusian and critical race theory informed analysis. They found that whilst all parents prioritised their children's education, the strategies used and intensity of involvement appeared to vary according to subtle differences in parents' habitus and possession of capitals, placing parents on a continuum, with parents at the lower end of the continuum "hoping for the best". Despite the class advantages of participants, many experienced a devaluing and rejection of their cultural capital by White-dominated schools. McCarthy Foubert (2019) carried out research in a Midwestern city with sixteen conventionally school-engaged Black parents and produced detailed case studies of five of these. Whilst the United States clearly offers a different racial context from the UK, McCarthy Foubert's findings are strikingly similar to those of Vincent et al. (2012) in that the frequency and intensity of parental interventions varied according to social positioning, and that parents were not always able to protect Black children from what she describes as the "antiblackness" of schools. In the UK component of their research, Chapman and Bhopal (2012) found that the Black and Asian mothers involved reported being judged by their children's schools in a way that the researchers identified as being on the basis of the amount of social and cultural capital that they were seen to possess, and mothers felt that their presence within schools was viewed as hostile and that they were not welcome. Such findings suggest that discourses around parental involvement fail to understand how schools might respond to the interventions of certain groups of parents.

Research has also considered the micro-level of interactions between parents and teachers. In their research into parent-school relationships in the US, Weininger and Lareau (2003) carried out observation of parent-teacher meetings at two elementary schools in a Northeastern city in the US, noting that such data is rare due to formidable access barriers. Whilst a superficial analysis considering only the ritual elements of the meetings would suggest little by way of social class differences, they identified stark differences in both the authority relationship and the information exchanged. Whilst middle-class parents generally appeared comfortable in these interactions and were able to steer conversations around to their specific concerns, working-class parents appeared visibly uncomfortable and were relatively passive. Perhaps more importantly, the amount and the quality of the information exchanged varied according to social class, and middle-class parents were more able to engage with teachers' assessments and recommendations and to elicit potentially useful information from them. This, again, suggests that there may be unequal rewards from parental involvement, and children will not all benefit equally.

Research has tended to ignore the fact that young people can be active participants in their parents' involvement or non-involvement with their school. Edwards and Alldred's (2000) research produced a typology of young people's involvement, finding that they could be active or passive in relation to parental involvement or "uninvolvement", commenting that "young people could be just as active in discouraging, evading and obstructing their parents' involvement as they could in its promotion" (445). They found social class differences in young people's approach, with middle-class students most likely to take a stance of passivity, which tended to mean accepting their parents' involvement, whilst working-class students were more likely to be active in *discouraging* involvement. This may intersect with ethnicity, and Crozier and Davies (2007) found that some of the young people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage involved in their research wanted to keep their parents away from school because they were embarrassed about or for their parents, or were concerned that their parents would experience racism. This demonstrates that home-school relationships may be mediated by the young people involved, this influenced by class and ethnicity. This probably becomes more likely once students reach sixth form due to increasing independence and, potentially, an enhanced ability to intervene in parents' involvement efforts.

From the research literature and my own experience, it is clear that a parent or carer's involvement with their child's school can bring advantages. These may include securing additional support, adjustments to teaching practices, and special exemptions, and, in certain cases, particularly in post-16 education, could make the difference between a student being able to continue their academic career at the school and being asked to leave. However, what is also clear is that firstly, parents experience an unequal inclination and capacity for involvement, this largely based on social class, and, secondly, schools and teachers are not equally responsive to parents, with parents treated differently according to social background and ethnicity. This suggests that home-school relationships are an important area for consideration in relation to differential educational achievement.

Institutional factors

Debate around the relative importance – or "educational effectiveness" – of schools can be traced to the publication of the *Coleman Report* in the USA, which concluded that "Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context" (Coleman, 1966: 325). However, subsequent research by Rutter et al. (1979) in the UK found that, after accounting for intake differences, students attending the most

successful schools attained four times as many examination passes as those attending the least successful schools, suggesting that schools are *highly influential*, this providing the context for greater optimism about what schools can do. In the time since then, there have been numerous theoretical and methodological advances in the field of educational effectiveness research (Reynolds et al., 2014), and whilst there remains a lively debate on the topic (see Reynolds et al., 2011 for a comprehensive overview), few would argue against both a child's background and the school environment being of importance. In this section, I will first discuss the education market and school "quality" before moving on to consider pedagogy and classroom practices.

The education market and school "quality"

The enormous complexity of the school system in England (and the disadvantages of this) has been noted by many (Ball, 2012; West and Nikolai, 2013; Francis, 2018; Keddie and Mills, 2019). In the 19th century, churches were the principal providers of education, and state-maintained religious schools remain an important feature of the education landscape (Allen and Vignoles, 2009). The Education Act 1944 established a national system of education comprising schools under the supervision of local education authorities, and the following decades saw numerous changes to the system, including the emergence and retreat of various types of maintained schools (West and Wolfe, 2018). The 1988 Education Reform Act saw the introduction of a quasi-market in England with parents able to choose (or, in fact, state preference for) schools; schools funded predominantly according to the number of pupils on roll; and league tables published to facilitate parental choice and incentivise improved performance so that schools ensured their viability (West and Bailey, 2013). Numerous changes since then, including Labour's gradual introduction of academies in the early 2000s and the Conservative-led Coalition government's Academies Act 2010, have resulted in a complicated system of different sorts of schools – indeed, the range of school types in England is such that mapping this "internationally unparalleled" landscape is a complex task (Courtney, 2015). The complicated system of schooling in England leads Stephen Ball to argue that we have not an education system but "a rickety, divided, unstable, and often ineffective, but nonetheless overbearing, educational apparatus" (Ball, 2018: 208).

Within the UK's increasingly differentiated and stratified education "market", working-class students and certain minority groups may be disadvantaged in terms of the schools that they attend. This may be in part because of the choice process (Keddie and Mills, 2019), as parents differ in terms of their inclination and their capacity to engage with the market (Gewirtz et al., 1994). These differences are strongly related to social class, with cultural capital particularly

crucial (ibid) – as Evans sardonically notes, "Having invested so much energy at home in making their child clever, middle class parents tend to be far more discriminating and strategic about which school to send their child to" (2006: 8). Whilst school choice policies are premised on parents' "rationality", Leroux (2015) finds that more than four in ten parents do not consider examination results and academic reputation as important factors in their choice of secondary school, and parents with lower qualification and income levels are significantly less likely to consider academic performance than more educated and affluent parents. Reay and Lucey (2003) demonstrate the way in which the middle-classes are able to use their economic, cultural, and social capital as well as the "feel for the game" of the middle-class habitus to produce genuine school choice for their children, as opposed to the "illusory" "choices" of working-class parents. Pollard and Filer (2007) suggest that those who are unable to fully exercise school choice "may feel relatively disabled and be at risk of falling further behind" (457), linking school choice with student engagement and achievement. Along with differences in relation to parental choice-making, it needs to be remembered that, ultimately, in many cases, the school decides which pupils are to attend (West, 2006; Gorard; 2016). Whilst recent research on school admissions in London found high compliance around at least some aspects of admission arrangements (such as giving priority to looked after children), it also concluded that, in some cases, schools appeared to be choosing pupils rather than parents choosing schools, and that there are strong incentives for schools in charge of their own admissions to choose the most "desirable" pupils (West and Hind, 2018). As noted by Keddie and Mills (2019), schools may engage in "gaming" practices to improve reputational statuses, with schools' "market position" having become all-important (Youdell, 2004).

As a result of choice and selection, as well as socio-spatial segregation and gentrification (Butler et al., 2013), we may find children "clustered" into particular schools in terms of a range of characteristics, including poverty and ethnicity, this commonly referred to as segregation (Gorard, 2016). The damage caused by school segregation includes both lower overall attainment and a larger achievement gap between advantaged students and disadvantaged students, as well as effects relating to a wide range of non-cognitive outcomes such as civic knowledge and engagement (ibid). Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) argue that we see concentrations of material, social, and educational disadvantage in schools that are neither designed nor equipped to deal with them. In such schools a large amount of energy goes into "'firefighting': dealing with behaviour, finding equipment, cajoling participation and liaising with parents" (612), all of which likely serves to undermine the quality of education offered. Further, segregation encourages what Butler et al. (2013) characterise as a "middle-class dichotomization of schooling" where "preferred schools are often praised to the heavens whilst

the shunned schools are similarly disparaged and deemed unacceptable" (ibid: 556), a point also made by Lucey and Reay (2002) who found schools to be demonised and idealised. Reay (2004b; 2007) considers the experience for children attending a "demonized" secondary school in Inner London. Whilst she found that children's experience of attending such a school was complex and messy rather than monolithic, there were still both psychic and material consequences of attending a "sink" school. However, whilst school segregation undoubtedly remains a problem, Gorard (2022) finds that the Pupil Premium does appear to have had some effect in terms of reducing socio-economic segregation, one of the aims of the policy.

The negative outcomes associated with school segregation may be a product of resource differences, teaching, or institutional habitus. England's complex school system is accompanied by complex financial arrangements (Belfield and Sibieta, 2016), and funding may not be distributed fairly: Reay (2017) describes the increased funding divisions within the state sector that have arisen in part because of the academies agenda and argues that working-class children are particularly disadvantaged by this. The research evidence generally supports a relationship between increased school spending and school outcomes, although the effects are modest (Department for Education, 2017). Clearly, a school's resources are likely to be more consequential for children from the poorest backgrounds. A school's resources are highly dependent on the funding it receives, though also decisions as to how money is spent, with school leaders having considerable autonomy over, for example, the use of Pupil Premium funding (Morris and Dobson, 2020). This may be used in ways that can most easily demonstrate "value for money" and "impact" (Craske, 2018). Real terms funding per pupil has declined in the past decade, and this is particularly marked in terms of sixth form funding (Sibieta, 2020a). The Association of Colleges (2017) notes that the Pupil Premium, the DfE's major financial initiative to support pupils from the poorest families, stops at age 16; whilst private schools increase their fees for sixth form, the DfE cuts funding by approximately 20%.

Obviously, a school's most important resource is its teachers, and England faces challenges in terms of the recruitment and retention of teachers (See et al., 2020). Schools vary in their ability to attract and retain staff, with disadvantaged schools reporting greater challenges (Sibieta, 2020b) and some schools failing to fill posts or appoint permanent staff. Research has found teachers' subject knowledge to be of great importance, and, if falling below a certain level, this can be a significant impediment for students' learning (Coe et al., 2014), highlighting the problem of not being able to fill posts with specialist teachers. Research for the Sutton Trust found that teachers in disadvantaged schools were more likely to report that their department was not well-staffed with suitably qualified teachers and that this was affecting the quality of education that their school was providing (Allen and McInerney, 2019).

It has long been known that schools develop processes that reflect their socioeconomic composition so that social class becomes embedded in the school culture: "Solidly middle class schools have strongly supportive student cultures which allow them to teach an academic, examination based curriculum and organise themselves relatively smoothly. Working class schools will, in general, be quite the opposite" (Thrupp, 1997: 23). Whilst this clearly represents a crude simplification, schools can be seen to have an "institutional habitus" (Reay et al., 2001; Smyth and Banks, 2012) comprising of "a complex mix of curriculum offer, teaching practices and what children bring with them to the classroom" (Reay, 1998a: 68), informed by assumptions about education and their pupils' educational trajectories (Ingram, 2009). A school's institutional habitus "provides the parameter of possibilities in terms of identity work and the range of learner identities" (Reay et al., 2010: 111). Much of the classic sociology of education argued that schools make available different educational experiences and curriculum knowledge according to the social class of students (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bernstein, 2003b), this thesis offered tentative empirical support by Anyon (1980), who found a "hidden curriculum" of work, with classwork in the working-class schools in her sample rote and mechanistic. The clustering of disadvantage may mean teachers adapt their teaching to the average (actual or presumed) level of their classes, resulting in less stimulating and challenging learning environments in disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2018). De Fraja et al. (2010) found that parental background had an effect on school effort, with schools "working harder" when parents were from more privileged backgrounds, and suggests that this may be because middle-class parents are more vocal in advocating for their children's interests. The institutional habitus of a school shapes student behaviour, including in relation to decisions around higher education (Reay et al., 2001; Smyth and Banks, 2012).

Lupton et al. (2021) note that "GCSEs act as a critical watershed in the English education system" (2021: 6). Whilst, in theory, post-16 destinations are determined by students' choices within the post-16 marketplace, there is evidence that a complex set of factors influence young people's decisions (ibid). There are social and ethnic inequalities in the choices available and choices made at age 16 (Allen et al., 2016), and, as with choice of secondary school, cultural and social capital are likely to shape choices. Young people sitting A-levels in London may have a "choice" between schools' sixth forms, sixth form colleges, and further education colleges, though their actual choices may be limited by their GCSE grades – GCSE results may "destroy tentatively held aspirations" (Ball et al., 1999: 221). Removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance may have further limited students' choice of sixth form as they may be less able to pay for travel (Wilson, 2011). The post-16 sector is education's "wild frontier for selection and marketisation" (Playfair, 2014), and differences between institutions may become particularly

stark as providers are largely free to set their own entry requirements in terms of GCSE grades. Because of the relationship between achievement and social background, we may find greater segregation than is seen in compulsory schooling, with attendant consequences.

Pedagogy and teaching practices

Pedagogy can be understood as "any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another" (Watkins and Mortimore, 1999: 3). Debates around pedagogy have tended to be underpinned by a historic dichotomy between traditionalism and progressivism (Francis et al., 2017). This distinction was articulated by John Dewey (1938), who saw traditional education as a system consisting of bodies of knowledge and developed standards which were delivered by the teacher, whilst progressive education was child-centred, with children learning through experience. Very simply, traditional education emphasises academic competence and subject mastery (Ackerman, 2003), and, according to Kohn, children are "separate selves at separate desks" (2008: 20). Progressive education, on the other hand, involves more "hands on" learning (Flinders and Thornton, 1998) through individual and group work, and is more self-directed. Pogrow (2006) argues that, for over a century, the pendulum has swung between traditionalism and progressivism, and that whilst pure traditionalism is "brain dead", pure progressivism lives "in a fairy tale land" (142), and attempts at either are doomed. Whilst the binary may be simplistic – or, indeed, amount to a "dysfunctional dichotomy" (Cain and Chapman, 2014) – it does capture identifiably different educational philosophies, even if these represent what we might think of as ideal types. Drawing on some of the classic sociological work, I will first outline some of the different sociological orientations to pedagogy. I will then move on to more contemporary sociological work looking at, as Bernstein put it, the "arabesques of classroom interaction" (2003b: 7). Finally, I will consider research investigating the effectiveness of specific teaching practices.

Classic sociological orientations towards pedagogy

For Bourdieu, the education system serves to "maintain the preexisting order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1998: 20). Further, Bourdieu provocatively argued that "All pedagogic action (PA) is objectively symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 5). According to Bourdieu, the school transmits the knowledge of the dominant class, and so it is to be expected that working-class and some minority ethnic students will experience educational difficulties, with similar claims made by many others involved in the "new sociology of education", including Young (1971). The notion of pedagogy as symbolic

violence has been critiqued by those who argue for a recognition of the *necessary* as well as the arbitrary within education (Nash, 2010). Indeed, Young (2007) later revised his views on knowledge, distinguishing between "knowledge of the powerful" and "powerful knowledge". Others argue that, in fact, the symbolic violence occurs when working-class and minority ethnic students are denied the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills or to only develop these minimally (Watkins, 2018). In other writing, Bourdieu (1974) does seem to acknowledge this, noting that working-class pupils are penalised and privileged pupils favoured via teaching techniques and academic criteria that fail to take into account cultural inequalities between pupils of different social classes. Further, he notes that pedagogical practices that may be beneficial for working-class pupils – he uses examples of explicitly technically methodical pedagogy and rigorous exam preparation – tend to be disparaged (ibid). This suggests that certain teaching methods and techniques could serve to level the playing field, and this provides a more fruitful starting place for a discussion regarding the effects of different pedagogical practices.

Bernstein made an enormous contribution to the sociology of education through his large body of work, which spans decades and resists both easy categorisation and concision. Whilst his early work (introduced in the previous section) was on sociolinguistics, his later work more directly addressed issues of pedagogy, some of the earliest sociological writing to do so. Bernstein described schools as operating with two pedagogic discourses: a regulative (or moral) discourse and an instructional discourse. Bernstein was interested in what he called framing in instructional discourse – "*the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship*" (Bernstein, 2003a: 80, emphasis original). He outlined that instructional framing can be strong, implying considerable teacher control, or weak, implying greater learner control. Writing on early years education, but applicable to other phases, Bernstein (2003a) also distinguished between "visible" and "invisible" pedagogies, these mapping onto "traditional" and "progressive" pedagogic practices, with visible pedagogy involving strong framing and invisible pedagogy weak framing.

Whilst it seems that Bourdieu (1974) favoured explicit pedagogy, Bernstein's approach to pedagogy is rather more nuanced. Typically, Bernstein does not suggest that either weak or strong instructional framing is necessarily preferable for working-class (and "racially disadvantaged") children. In the case of strong framing, "control is double faced" (Bernstein, 2000: 5) as it carries both the potential for social reproduction and for change. Equally, weak framing can cut both ways: whilst it may reduce social class achievement differences, he also notes that, for example, framing in relation to knowledge selection is often weak for those

presumed less able, “whom we have given up educating” (Bernstein, 1971: 90). However, he did identify that the strong pacing of the academic curriculum of the school disadvantages working-class students; in an argument very similar to that of Bourdieu, Bernstein argues that the academic curriculum cannot be effectively acquired only in the time spent at school but, rather, “time at school must be supplemented by official pedagogic time at home” (2003a: 205). According to Bernstein, this doubly disadvantages working-class children who are already disadvantaged by their orientation to language. Further, Bernstein (2003a) noted that both visible and invisible pedagogies favour the middle-class child: for example, the middle-class child is better equipped to manage the (presumed) strong pacing of visible pedagogy due to the pedagogic context of the home but is also better placed to understand the assumptions of invisible pedagogy. Therefore, invisible pedagogy merely offers the illusion of allowing working-class children to flourish, and they are likely to struggle with the demands of formal examinations. Bernstein’s interest in the mechanics of pedagogy has inspired empirical work on the different elements of instructional discourse, discussed later.

Anyon’s (1980, 1981) work demonstrated pedagogical practices varying according to social class, serving social reproduction. In a multi-site ethnography of elementary schools in different social-class settings, Anyon found that, even where there was a fairly standardised curriculum in use, there was social stratification of knowledge, and the “hidden curriculum” of school work had profound implications for everyday activity in education. Working-class students tended to be given undemanding tasks, “the purposes of which were often unexplained, and which were seemingly unconnected to thought processes or decision making of their own” (Anyon, 1981: 8), whilst work in the elite school involved students developing their intellectual and analytic skills. Overall, Anyon found that working-class students were not offered knowledge which would serve as cultural capital but, rather, knowledge that would contribute to social reproduction. Students seemed to recognise this, protesting that teachers “don’t teach us nothin’” (Anyon, 1980: 11). In an argument similar to that of Bowles and Gintis (1976), who claimed that schools sort pupils on the basis of class and then, through the “hidden curriculum” of school processes, prepare them for the occupational roles they are expected to assume, Anyon saw the “hidden curriculum” of school work as “tacit preparation for relating to the process of production in a particular way” (1980: 89). Anyon’s work provides a fascinating account of the differential use of a curriculum according to social class. However, the study is of elementary schools in the USA, where there are no national school examinations, possibly limiting its relevance to the UK, where all schools are held accountable for their students’ performance in national examinations.

More contemporary sociological work

Whilst most schools and teachers would profess a commitment to treating students equally, there is considerable research evidence for variation in teachers' expectations of different groups of pupils (Mazenod et al., 2019). Teacher expectations may influence pupils' educational outcomes, a phenomenon known since Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic experiment, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. In this study, elementary teachers were told that certain students could be expected to be "growth spurters" on the basis of their results on an aptitude test. In fact, these children were selected at random, with the researchers interested in whether, in a period of one year, those children who had greater intelligence attributed to them would show greater intellectual development than the control group. They found strong evidence for the "self-fulfilling prophecy": that when teachers expected certain students to show greater intellectual development, they did. Subsequent research has found teachers to transmit their expectations through a wide range of differential behaviours, including their affective behaviours, physical distance, off-task behaviour, input, and duration of interactions (Harris and Rosenthal, 1985). Whilst Rosenthal and Jacobson identified positive expectancy effects, negative expectancy effects – termed "Golem effects" – are possibly of greater concern, though also harder to study than positive, "Galatea effects" (Babad et al., 1982). Whilst there have been criticisms relating to Rosenthal and Jacobson's methodology, and in relation to the strength of their claim, in light of the mixed results of a replication experiment, research has fairly consistently shown the influence of teacher expectations (Hattie, 2009) and the self-fulfilling prophecy remains one of the most influential ideas in education research and practice (Wineburg, 1987).

Whilst Rosenthal and Jacobson's teachers were operating on the basis of false information provided by the researchers, there is reason to think that teachers may draw on their own stereotypes and prejudices to develop (or sustain) expectations of their pupils. This may be related to how closely students meet teachers' conception of the "ideal pupil", which may be strongly classed (Becker, 1952). Much research has found that some teachers may hold lower expectations of minority ethnic pupils (Mirza, 1992; Blair, 2001; Watkins and Noble, 2013; Demie, 2022). Archer et al. (2010) note that teachers working in urban, multicultural schools "may be operating with quite intricate differentiations in relation to a range of ethnic backgrounds" (2010: 46), but, still, ethnic differences may influence how teachers perceive their pupils (Gillborn, 1990; Archer and Francis, 2007; Watkins and Noble, 2013). These perceptions may directly affect pedagogical practices. For example, Watkins and Noble (2013) found that teachers drew on ethnic stereotypes to understand the learning process, assuming that students with supposedly similar cultural backgrounds shared particular traits. Where it was assumed that students' ethnic and social class backgrounds meant that they "lacked discipline", students

were provided with undemanding activities that required little productive engagement. Other researchers have found that ethnic stereotypes about young people's likely futures shape expectations of and interactions with them – for example, Brah suggested that "social imagery of Asian women as hapless dependents who would most likely be married off at the earliest possible opportunity" (1993: 447) shaped teachers' interactions with female Muslim students. Even high achieving groups may be regarded somewhat negatively: Archer and Francis (2007) found that despite British Chinese students being particularly high achievers, teachers considered them "inauthentic" learners. This demonstrates how even groups set up as "model minorities" are damaged by ethnic stereotyping (Bradbury, 2013) – indeed, even well-intentioned attempts at cultural sensitivity can result in the reproduction of limiting stereotypes and dubious educational initiatives (Watkins and Noble, 2013).

Our understanding of the power of teacher expectations and the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy is one of the reasons why "setting" by ability is regarded as problematic. Whilst the practice is often justified through discourses of nurturing and protection (Mazenod et al., 2019), ability setting has long been found to exacerbate existing inequalities (Jackson, 1964). Ability setting can influence outcomes through differential expectations as well as the use of ineffective teaching practices in lower sets (Macqueen, 2013), and Francis et al. (2019) found evidence of the inequitable deployment of teachers to different tracks, with teachers with higher qualifications in their taught subjects more likely to teach higher sets. This potentially "fixes" disadvantage (Boaler, 2005), and academic setting can contribute to lower attaining pupils becoming "stigmatised, disaffected and alienated from school" (Hallam and Ireson, 2007: 27). Recent research by Connelly et al. (2019) found high levels of what they termed "misallocation" in academic setting, particularly according to gender and ethnicity. Whilst the importance of students being able to move sets is often stressed, in practice there tends to be little movement, one reason being because there may be a gap between work that has been undertaken in the lower set and what is required for the higher set (Hallam and Ireson, 2007). Whilst "ability" grouping is much less common within sixth forms, in part because an academic filter has already been applied, previous practices of academic setting may still have formed an important part of students' prior educational experiences, influencing learner identities (Ball, 1984).

Research has long recognised that students may receive different amounts of teacher attention and support, and that some groups of students may feel that they are treated unfairly, with consequences for student-teacher relationships (discussed in the following section) and engagement and achievement. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) identified what they referred to as

an “A-C economy”, with “educational triage” occurring and teachers focusing on “borderline cases” in order to improve the school’s league table position. Whilst accountability measures have changed and the “A-C economy” is no more, it remains true that teachers’ time and energies may not be invested equitably, and Youdell (2004) suggests that mundane and subtle classroom practices of “classroom triage” shape students as learners. Calarco (2011) found that middle-class pupils receive more help from teachers as a result of more frequent and proactive help-seeking. Whilst teachers were not actively biased in favour of middle-class children, their responsiveness to their help-seeking meant that middle-class children “yielded meaningful situational advantages” (865). Reay (2006) found that students were treated differently according to social class in both primary and secondary classrooms. In relation to the female secondary students Reay interviewed, she notes that “A potent sense of unfairness and unequal treatment infuses their attitudes to both seating and levels of teacher attention” (Reay, 2006: 298), and these girls felt excluded from positive learning experiences. In general, as result of their treatment by teachers, working-class pupils described feelings of educational worthlessness and alienation. Gillborn et al.’s (2012) research with Black Caribbean middle-class parents found that, in parents’ experience, teachers tended to have systematically lower expectations for Black children and subjected them to heightened disciplinary scrutiny, as well as overlooking their achievements. Their participants’ accounts demonstrate how Black children may experience what feels like incessant and unfair criticism from teachers, and, combined with low academic expectations, Gillborn et al. argue that this produces a powerful barrier to Black children’s achievement.

Specific teaching practices

Whilst Bourdieu (1974) bemoaned the lack of effort to ascertain the most effective pedagogical methods, it would be difficult to make such a complaint today: since the 1990s, there has been a considerable focus on “what works” in education research (Oancea and Pring, 2008), and investigation into a vast range of teaching practices, amounting to an “evidence revolution in education” (Edovald and Nevill, 2021: 47). One of the most widely known texts within the “what works” field is Hattie’s (2009) *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Hattie notes that, within education, “everything seems to work” (2009: 2). Thus, he argues, the challenge is to identify what works best and, to this end, synthesised a huge number of meta-analyses, calculating effect sizes for different influences on learning. Summarising what he found, Hattie writes:

"Visible teaching and learning occurs when learning is the explicit goal, when it is appropriately challenging, when the teacher and the student both (in their various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained, when there is deliberate practice aimed at attaining mastery of the goal, when there is feedback given and sought, and when there are active, passionate, and engaging people (teacher, student, peers, and so on) participating in the act of learning" (Hattie, 2009: 22).

Overall, Hattie's findings emphasise the importance of teachers understanding the learning objectives and success criteria for their lessons, and how effectively they are attaining these criteria for all students. Formative assessment is crucial for this, providing feedback from students to teachers about what they know, which allows teaching and learning to be "synchronised and powerful" (Hattie, 2009: 173). Teachers need to understand how learners construct and reconstruct knowledge (ibid), and this should inform the organisation and pacing of teaching – key aspects of instructional framing identified by Bernstein (2003a).

However, despite the prominence of the "what works" agenda, there is some scepticism about "what works" education research in general and Hattie's work in particular. Noddings, for example, suggests that educational research "has made the error of supposing that method can be substitutes for individuals" (2005: 8), stripping away the special qualities of teachers and students. This is a useful reminder that what works in one context may not in another. Wrigley (2016) cautions that it is important to consider the meaning that terms such as "evidence-based practice" have acquired within the context of a neoliberal policy framework. He suggests that "what works" tends to be judged by simple quantitative methods and that it is the government's preference for fast-track teacher training routes that has created a need for simplistic "recipe books" for teaching, these serving to replace professional expertise. Higgins and Simpson (2011) note that Hattie's *Visible Learning* suffers from the usual problems of meta-analyses and then "adds more problems derived from the meta-meta-analysis level" (199). In a highly critical (and faintly risible) article, McKnight and Whitburn (2020) suggest that *Visible Learning* is cult-like, simulates pornography, and courts fascism. However, they do acknowledge that there is "much that is useful in Visible Learning's strategies" (32), including, for example, scaffolding learning.

Within the "what works" arena, a review of "what makes great teaching" for the Sutton Trust (Coe et al., 2014) identifies that there is strong evidence for the importance of pedagogical subject knowledge (and this falling below a certain level is a significant impediment for students' learning), and strong evidence for the importance of the quality of instruction,

identifying Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction as capturing key elements of this. In what has become an extremely influential work (indeed, arguably a key text for those who favour traditional methods), Rosenshine (2010) outlined ten principles of direct instruction, including beginning a lesson with a short review of previous learning; presenting new material in small steps; providing clear and detailed instructions and explanations; asking a large number of questions; checking for understanding; and requiring and monitoring independent practice. There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of direct instruction and its superiority compared to a range of alternative approaches influenced by constructivism, which involve what Kirschner et al. (2016) describe as "minimal guidance" (Hattie, 2009) – or that might be thought of as progressive methods.

Research has also sought to identify what amount to ineffective teaching practices. Lingard identifies what he describes as "pedagogies of indifference", characterised by low levels of intellectual demand, which meant that they were "failing to make a difference, particularly for students from families not possessing the requisite cultural capital" (2009: 175). Coe et al. (2014) identify a number of ineffective practices within their review, including the lavish use of praise, which, as well as potentially leading to a fixed mindset, communicates low expectations (Dweck, 1999) and may function as symbolic violence (Toshalis, 2012). As noted above, the research evidence favours explicit instruction and "discovery learning" is not supported for the learning of new material or methods (Coe et al, 2014; Dinham, 2017). Delpit (1995), an African American scholar and teacher educator, presents an account of applying the progressive methods that she had learnt in teacher training in a racially mixed school in Philadelphia, only to find that the White, middle-class children "zoomed ahead" whilst her Black students largely engaged in play. Focusing specifically on different approaches to teaching writing, but in an argument that could be broadened to education more generally, Delpit suggests that White, progressive teachers tended to see the teaching of skills as restrictive, or even politically repressive, whilst Black teachers saw it as "essential to their students' survival" (18). Black teachers' insistence on skill was "not a negation of their students' intellect… but an acknowledgement of it" (ibid). Ultimately, whilst progressive methods may be beneficial for middle-class children who have been the beneficiaries of concerted cultivation and have accumulated cultural capital within the home, they tend to disadvantage working-class and minority ethnic students – an argument suggested in some of the classic sociological work.

Work by Bernsteinian scholars has sought to empirically investigate different aspects of framing in instructional discourse. The Sociological Studies of the Classroom Project (ESSA) led by Ana Morais at University of Lisbon has used Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse to investigate

pedagogic practices that could improve the achievement of disadvantaged students. Morais (2002) argues for a "mixed pedagogy" of strong framing of evaluative criteria alongside weak framing and classification at levels including pacing and knowledge relations. The strong framing of evaluative criteria involves "clearly telling children what is expected of them, of identifying what is missing from their textual production, of clarifying the concepts, of leading them to make synthesis and broaden concepts and considering the importance attributed to language as a mediator of the development of higher mental processes." (Morais et al., 2004: 8). Pacing framing should be weak in order to allow for flexibility in acquisition to ensure that all children can meet the evaluative criteria, with strong framing of pacing disadvantaging working-class children. However, whilst weak pacing might be possible in primary schools, the context of public examinations for secondary school students tends to necessitate strong pacing in order to cover the required content. In relation to knowledge relations, Morais argues that weak classification can improve academic understanding and lead to higher-order thinking. She suggests that there should be a strong classification between the academic and non-academic but proposes close communication between them, which "has the potential to make knowledge more meaningful, understandable and applicable" (Morais, 2002: 561). This is supported by Barrett (2019), who carried out research using a Bernsteinian coding instrument in the New York classroom of a teacher whose students consistently achieved more highly than those in the school's other classrooms. Barrett notes that Mrs Ryan, the teacher at the centre of his research, does not attempt to keep students' "common sense" knowledge from the classroom but, rather, made the difference between academic and non-academic discourses recognisable, articulating these to allow for the development of greater student understanding. Mrs Ryan's approach seems to exemplify what Lingard (2009) describes as "productive pedagogy", this consisting of intellectual quality, connectedness, social support, and working with and valuing difference.

Whilst there is now a vast body of research evidence on pedagogical practices, it is not all in agreement. There does, however, appear to be reasonable consensus regarding the value of explicit instruction and evaluation (or feedback), as well as teacher responsiveness. There is good reason to believe that explicit instruction might be particularly beneficial for working-class and minority ethnic children – as noted by Delpit, "Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of "immersion" to learn them [the rules of the culture of power], explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier" (Delpit, 1988: 283). Research has also highlighted the importance of relationships between students and teachers, this influencing both student engagement and achievement.

Student-teacher relationships

Research has demonstrated that relationships with teachers are one of the most critical features of students' educational experiences (Pomeroy, 1999; Noddings, 2005; Archer et al., 2010; Duffy and Ellwood, 2013; McGrath and Van Bergen, 2015).

Researchers have investigated students' perspectives on teachers' contributions to positive student-teacher relationships. Archer et al. (2010) found broad agreement amongst the inner-city secondary students involved in their research with regard to the qualities of "good" teachers: they were fair and measured in their discipline, able to maintain control, and able to provide explanations of and support with academic work. Similarly, Lumby (2012) found that whilst her "disaffected" year 11 and 12 participants did not necessarily have the vocabulary to analyse what made for a good relationship with teachers, they could describe the qualities of a "nice" teacher: they were interested in pupils' individual welfare, they made an effort to help, and they gave praise. McHugh et al.'s (2013) high school and university student participants reported several teacher behaviours that facilitated the building of "bridges" with students: effortful engagement, the establishment of commonalities, and the provision of support. Chhuon and LeBaron Wallace (2014) found that students distinguished between teachers' likeability and provision of instrumental support, valuing support more highly.

Whilst research has identified fairly consistent student views of what makes for good student-teacher relationships, it is important to recognise the complexity of these relationships (McHugh et al., 2013; Tobbell and O'Donell, 2013; Chhuon and LeBaron Wallace, 2014; Collins and Ting, 2014). Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) highlight how student-teacher relationships are embedded within a nested series of contexts: the classroom, the school, and the academic culture. These interact to influence the quality of relationships – for example, it is easier for teachers to forge good relationships with students when the class size is smaller (ibid) and in a more caring school environment. Raufelder et al. (2013) suggest that, during the typical school day, there is not much opportunity "for teachers and students to meet each other on the 'being-level' as human beings" (2013: 12), and the accountability and examination focused educational culture of the UK might well serve to undermine or strain student-teacher relationships. McHugh et al. (2013) found that their participants wanted teachers to build supportive relationships in which students were recognised, cared for, and understood whilst, at the same time, wanting teachers to "detect and uphold student-identified interpersonal boundaries" (19). The fine line between teachers' effortful engagement and what students might regard as intrusive highlights the complexity of student-teacher relationships for older students.

Student-teacher relationships are likely to be important for student engagement and student achievement. Student-teacher relationships appear to influence student motivation (Skinner and Belmont, 1993), and research has found that students reported working harder for teachers that they liked (Fredriksen and Rhodes; Raufelder et al., 2013). In longitudinal research in the United States, Crosnoe et al. (2004) found that students who held more positive views of their teachers achieved more highly and experienced fewer problems in school, suggesting that what they refer to as "intergenerational bonding" protects against students' alienation from school. In a meta-analysis, Cornelius-White (2007) found student-teacher relationships to have a powerful effect on student attitudes and achievement, and argues that, in order to reap the benefits, teachers need to demonstrate that they care about the learning of each student and to empathise with students. Student-teacher relationships may be even more important for working-class students for whom the middle-class "mentorship" of teachers may help to facilitate success in their academic endeavours (Wang, 2014; Lareau, 2015).

Whilst positive student-teacher relationships promote student engagement and achievement, non-existent or negative relationships are associated with disengagement and problems at school. Research participants have identified teachers' lack of effort to make a meaningful connection or offer support and teachers who "just teach" as barriers to student-teacher relationships (McHugh et al., 2013; Chhuon and LeBron Wallace, 2014). Newberry and Davis (2008) found a range of influences on teachers' feelings of "closeness" for the students in their class, including teachers' perceptions of students' personalities and the degree to which a student presented the teacher with challenges. It is not difficult to see how such judgements might be structured by, for example, class and ethnicity, and they found that teachers' sense of closeness to students could result in differential treatment, marginalising or privileging certain students. Archer et al. (2010) found that students disengaged from lessons where they felt that teachers marginalised or ignored them, whilst Wang (2014) found that "incompetent, offensive, and indolent classroom behaviours" (72) undermined student-teacher relationships and saw students lose interest in the teacher's subject. Chhuon and LeBaron Wallace (2014) found that students wanted teachers to give them "the benefit of the doubt" and saw negative interactions with staff as being based on teachers' unwillingness to provide this. This puts teachers in a difficult position, as such use of discretion could potentially lead to differential treatment of students. Young people who have dropped out of school early frequently reference negative relationships with teachers as their reason for dropping out (Lumby, 2012; Duffy and Ellwood, 2013; Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann, 2016), and Lumby (2012) reports that a recurring theme in negative relationships with teachers was students' belief that teachers did not like, care for, or respect them. Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2016) found that teachers tended to "misrecognise"

students' reasons for dropping out, attributing drop out to factors beyond the school and minimising their own role.

A range of factors may influence the nature of student-teacher relationships, including issues associated with students' social class: teacher labelling, students' cultural capital and habitus, and the influence of parents. Becker (1952) found that teachers categorise pupils according to social class and that these categorisations influence how teachers respond to issues of "discipline" and "moral acceptability", with Becker claiming that "differences in child training are matched by variation in teachers' reaction" (1952: 457). Becker argued that the further students departed from teachers' conception of the "ideal pupil", the more difficulty teachers experienced in working with them. Whilst some of Becker's language and the experiences that teachers reported may appear antiquated – for example, one teacher in his research was horrified by the rotten teeth of "slum children" – his wider observations about the way teachers categorise and relate to students likely remain relevant. Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that students have differentiated ability to comply with "institutionalized standards of evaluation" (597) according to cultural capital – in other words, students' ability to successfully navigate relationships with their schools and their teachers may be linked to their cultural capital. Whilst privileged students may navigate relationships with teachers with a sense of ease (Khan, 2011; Taylor, 2021), working-class students may traverse these in ways that prove less successful as teachers favour middle-class styles of communication and negotiation (Gast, 2018). As well as students' modes of communication influencing student-teacher relationships, parents may have an indirect bearing on student-teacher relationships. As discussed previously, home-school relationships differ according to social class. When teachers know that parents have a "direct line" to senior staff (Kulz, 2017), they may be more sensitive or generous towards these students, giving them greater "leeway" (Calarco, 2020).

Many researchers have found that ethnicity influences how teachers respond to students, with research suggesting that Black students are often seen as representing a particular challenge (Gillborn, 1990; Sewell, 1997; Youdell, 2003). Gillborn (1990) found that White teachers in his study school subscribed to a "myth" of Afro-Caribbean challenge, and this had serious consequences for student-teacher relationships. Sewell (1997) suggests that teachers' responses to Black Caribbean boys are shaped by stereotypes about Black masculinity, which means that teachers interpret Black boys as bigger, more aggressive, and more sexual. He found that many teachers saw Black Caribbean boys as instinctively anti-authority, this shaping teachers' responses to pupils, and Black students are seen to be in need of greater surveillance and control (Youdell, 2003). Archer (2004) found that Black femininity was regarded by

teachers as "problematically loud" and thus seen as challenging, and Gast (2018) suggests that teachers learn to "conflate blackness with disorderliness, poor educational attitudes, and failure" (269).

Whilst Black boys may be positioned as particularly problematic, intersections of ethnicity and gender also influence teachers' perceptions of and relationships with students from other groups. Archer et al. (2010) found that many of the minority ethnic young women in their study experienced conflict with teachers on the basis of what students characterised as being "loud" and "speaking my mind", and note that White teachers might be particularly likely to interpret minority ethnic students as aggressive. Mirza and Metoo (2018) argue that teachers' perceptions of Muslim girls' lack of agency translated into them "devising routes for their 'empowerment' based on western feminist, neoliberal models of success and progress" (227). They suggest that Muslim girls are seen as needing saving from their culture, and this meant that schools intervened in the everyday cultural practices of female Muslim students, positioning their Muslim culture as the barrier to their success, not racism. This would be highly likely to have implications for student-teacher relationships. Archer and Francis (2007) note that, whilst on average, Chinese girls achieve very highly, they may be rendered invisible within schooling or pathologised as achieving in the "wrong way". Given the value placed on the idea of natural "brilliance" (Francis et al., 2017), Chinese girls may be overlooked by teachers and thus not benefit from strong relationships with them.

The nature and importance of student-teacher relationships may vary during students' learning careers as students' needs and the teaching context changes. The role of the secondary school form tutor has been identified as a very important one (Marland and Rogers, 1997; Lodge, 2000), tutors often having an overview of, and primary responsibility for, a student's learning and progress (Lodge, 2000). The literature on educational transitions emphasises the importance of relationships with teachers (Hargreaves and Galton, 2000; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; Wang, 2014), and this likely has implications for students' transition to sixth form, an underexplored transition. Research suggests that students see their relationships with teachers as decreasing in closeness as they progress through education (Prewett et al., 2019). However, despite students' perceptions of decreased closeness, student-teacher relationships may, in some respects, increase in importance as, for example, students who have more autonomy may choose to not attend a class where they have a negative relationship with the teacher (McHugh et al., 2013). The importance, potential complexity, and changing nature of student-teacher relationships suggests that they are an important topic for exploration in my research.

Aspirations

Aspirations can be understood as relating to "a student's ability to identify and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals. This construct of aspirations has two major underpinnings: inspiration and ambitions" (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996: 130). It has long been suggested that student aspirations are implicated in differential achievement. This has been a prominent focus in education research, discourse, and policy (Roberts and Evans, 2012), with raising the achievement of underachieving groups often presented as mainly a question of raising aspirations (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011).

Aspirations can be understood as shaped by habitus, with habitus providing "horizons for action" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), suggesting that social class may place limits on what is considered "thinkable". However, many studies have challenged the notion that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds lack aspiration – though these may not always converge with the "high aspirations" promoted by official discourse. Stahl and Baars, for example, found that whilst the working-class boys in their study *did* hold aspirations, there was a tension between the "the neoliberal imperative to be socially mobile, footloose, and 'aspirational'" (2016: 321) and the boys' attachment to place. Smyth and Wrigley suggest that rather than lacking aspiration, working-class groups may have "a more modest, generalized, and realizable desire for a good life" (2013: 126). Other research has suggested that rather than aspirations needing to be "raised", it is more a question of keeping them on track (Archer et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2012). St Clair et al. (2013) found young people to have very high aspirations – indeed, far higher than what the labour market could possibly support. They also found that there was often a disparity between high occupational aspirations and a young person's educational trajectory. The relationship between aspirations and achievement is clearly not a straightforward, causal one (Gorard et al., 2012). However, aspirations do appear to be important to young people's educational trajectories (Gorard et al., 2012; Khattab, 2015; McCulloch, 2017), suggesting that they remain an area worthy of exploration.

Educational transition: moving into and progressing through post-16 education

The literature identifies a number of areas relevant to the production of differential engagement and achievement within education, but the specific interest in *A-level* engagement and achievement requires a consideration of how these might interact with the arrangements and

requirements of different stages of education. The concept of the "learning career" offers the possibility for a temporal understanding of engagement and achievement, specifically relating to dispositions towards learning in the transition to and during A-levels. This section will outline the concept of the learning career before moving on to consider some of the literature relating to transition.

The concept of the "learning career" is drawn from symbolic interactionism and is particularly associated with the work of Martin Bloomer and Phil Hodkinson. The learning career is concerned with how students' dispositions to learning can change over time, "part of the evolving identity of a person" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997: 61), this shaped by both the structure of and experiences within education, and individuals' wider lives. Somewhat counterintuitively, given the greater choice and specialisation involved, Conner and Pope (2013) note that students' engagement in learning reduces as they progress through school. Students' dispositions towards learning at A-level may be influenced by a range of different factors. These include new pedagogical practices and teacher expectations; new institutional arrangements, for example, in the structure of the school day; or factors outside of school, such as parental expectations or additional responsibilities. Bloomer and Hodkinson's work aims to identify the factors which influence learning careers and to analyse the processes by which young people's dispositions to and decisions about learning develop.

Within the educational literature, "transition" is used to refer both to the movement between school years within the same school and the move out of one school system and into another, including into university. School transitions are an expected part of a young person's educational career, with most children moving between different schools at least twice. However, whilst expected, "school transitions interrupt the continuity of life" (Anderson et al., 2000: 325) and may have a range of consequences as young people adjust (Chedzoy and Burden, 2005). There is much academic literature on transition, but this has tended to focus on the move between primary and secondary school or young people's transition into higher education, and relatively little sociological work has focused on the transition from compulsory Key Stage 4 education – GCSEs – to optional full-time Key Stage 5 "sixth form" education, including A-levels. However, as the transition sits between the primary-secondary transition and the transition to higher education both chronologically and "qualitatively", literature on both the earlier and later transitions is likely to offer some insight.

Galton et al. (2009) identify two main approaches to understanding transition: a "matching" theory of transfer, which hypothesises that transfer is most successful when there is a match

between the developmental needs of the young person and the school environment, and transition as "status passage", a ritual designed to initiate an individual into a new status. The first approach suggests that there ought to be considerable continuity between school environments, whilst the second suggests the importance of change. Within the literature on transition, elements of both continuity and change are identified, and the transition to sixth form involves both, with continuity possibly more prominent for students transitioning to their own school sixth form and change more prominent where students move to a new institution.

The literature on primary to secondary transition has identified that transition is often accompanied, at least initially, by a decline in average grades, a less positive attitude towards school subjects and to teachers, and a decrease in self-esteem (Chedzoy and Burden, 2005). This suggests that the discontinuities of transition produce challenges for the student – although it should also be noted that the transition to secondary school will coincide with the onset of puberty for many students. Whilst much of the literature highlights the negative aspects of transitions, Reay and Lucey's (2000) research highlights some of the more positive features, noting that most of their primary age participants communicated a sense of pleasurable anticipation about the move to secondary school. This highlights that transition offers not just challenges but also, potentially, exciting possibilities.

As noted, there is limited literature on the transition to sixth form, or of sixth form experiences more generally. However, a small number of research studies were found. These include Hodkinson and Bloomer's (2000) longitudinal study of young people's experience of "Stokingham Sixth Form College" which considers how "institutional culture" shapes dispositions to learning. Whilst Hodkinson and Bloomer emphasise the positive institutional culture of the college and how it had contributed to participants' intellectual development, they note that it is difficult to attribute this to specific strategies or techniques employed within the college, or to explicit institutional policies. Rather, students entered the college positively orientated to the college culture, and their presence confirmed and reproduced that culture. Students and staff ascribed to a shared "notion" of Stokingham, and students' dispositions simultaneously shaped and became shaped by the college's institutional culture. This study emphasises the importance of students positively choosing an institution, as well as the strong influence institutional culture can have on students' dispositions to learning.

Other research considers the students' experience of the transition from GCSE to A-level in individual subjects, particularly Mathematics. Findings include that both the academic challenge

and the expectations of independent work came as a shock to students (Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011); that young people's enjoyment of, and identification with, a subject can suffer (Mendick, 2008); and that students' encounters with threshold concepts can prove highly challenging (Dunn, 2019). This work serves to provide some indications of the kinds of academic challenges students may encounter in their A-levels.

Briggs et al. (2012) note that student transition to university is replete with challenges. Much of the literature on the transition to higher education focuses on how students manage the new academic demands of university (Burton & Dowling, 2005), including the development of the possibly new study skills required, whilst other research focuses on how to build student engagement and belonging (Thomas, 2012). The literature emphasises the importance of the first year, with this characterised as difficult (Krause and Coates, 2008), particularly for students from working-class backgrounds (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), for whom it might prove to be a "real rollercoaster" (Christie et al., 2008). Whilst there are clearly differences between the transition to sixth form and the transition to higher education, not least that higher education students may also be living away from home for the first time, the literature remains relevant to the sixth form transition due to the similar age of the students involved and because both involve an expectation of greater independence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to provide an overview of the different bodies of literature of relevance to my thesis topic: learning and identities, differential educational achievement, and educational transition. In discussing the psychological literature on engagement, self-regulation, and motivation, I noted how students' capacities in relation to these may be socialised and considered how identities may shape students' relationships with learning.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provided an entry point to the vast literature related to education inequalities and differential achievement, and I divided this according to, broadly, the family and home, the school, and aspirations. From the literature, a wide range of factors contribute to making academic achievement more difficult for certain groups of pupils, with educational trajectories influenced by economic and cultural capital, the school attended, and teachers and teaching practices. Put simply, working-class children grow up with less economic and cultural capital and are likely to go to worse schools. Working-class and minority-ethnic students may find themselves labelled or treated unfairly by teachers and are likely to be disadvantaged due to lacking cultural capital. All of this is likely to influence student engagement and achievement.

To consider the specific interest in A-level engagement and achievement, I have introduced the concept of the "learning career" and provided a brief overview of the literature on educational transition. This suggests the importance of considering both continuity and change, and tends to argue that transition presents students with a range of challenges.

The following chapter will discuss how I carried out my research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will discuss how I carried out my research, which was ethnographic in nature. It took place within two institutions: a school sixth form, over the course of one academic year, and a sixth form college, over the course of just over one academic year. I will first introduce the research sites before moving on to discuss the methods employed to generate data, data analysis, positionality and reflexivity, and ethics.

The research sites

I approached a number of schools, my criteria being that the demographics and GCSE achievement were roughly “average” for Inner London and that they were reasonably easily accessible from my home. My research eventually took place in two inner-city educational institutions: a school sixth form (which will be referred to as “St Bernard’s”) and a sixth-form college (referred to as “Riverview College”), which is within a different Inner London borough and at which I had a paid support staff role.

Gaining access to the research sites was aided by my professional experience: when I first approached schools, I was in my third year working in a school sixth form. In line with general practice, I offered the standard assurances of providing both the school and participants with pseudonyms.

St Bernard’s was the first school I heard back from – I received a prompt response from one of the heads of sixth form, whom I have called Mr Andrews. He invited me in for a meeting to discuss the research. He expressed interest in the project and seemed impressed by my qualifications and experience, and we also had an easy rapport. Mr Andrews told me that he would take my request to the headteacher, the ultimate gatekeeper, who, on Mr Andrews’ recommendation, quickly agreed to granting me access.

Following my year of fieldwork at St Bernard’s, I accepted a paid position at Riverview College and approached the principal several months in to enquire about further data collection for my PhD, recognising the value and depth that it could add to my research project. I spent just over an academic year carrying out fieldwork at Riverview.

St Bernard's

St Bernard's is in the London borough of Marston (a pseudonym), an ethnically diverse local authority with both high levels of deprivation and wealth. St Bernard's is located in one of the borough's poorest wards. Like many Inner London local authorities, educational achievement in Marston was very poor in the nineties and began to improve in the early 2000s. In parallel, this period saw an increasing number of young people in the borough continuing in full-time education to study Level 3 qualifications (A-levels and "equivalent") after their GCSEs. At the time of my research, several secondary schools in the local authority were rated as "Outstanding" by Ofsted, with all others rated as "Good". The local authority's post-16 offering consisted of approximately a dozen school sixth forms and one further education college.

St Bernard's sits on a large main road roaring with traffic, an approximately thirty-minute walk from the City, the primary central business district of the capital. Architecturally striking, the beneficiary of a multi-million-pound upgrade as part of the Building Schools for the Future programme, it stands out from the general dilapidation of its immediate surroundings, which include several boarded-up, semi-derelict buildings covered in graffiti tags. Whilst younger students enter the school site from an entrance on the main road, there is a separate sixth form entrance gate which students open using their ID cards.

St Bernard's is a reasonably large secondary school, serving a diverse and relatively disadvantaged population: around 80% of its students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, and approximately 40% of its students are FSM eligible. The school has a Christian character which likely influences its demographics, and neighbouring secondary schools have more Muslim students. The proportion of students attaining the GCSE benchmark rose rapidly from 2011 and, at the time of research, was close to the local authority average and significantly higher than the national average. Around a third of year 11 students progress on to the school sixth form, which has approximately 250 students. At the time of my research, the sixth form had below-average outcomes, particularly for year 12, when, at the time, students sat AS levels. When fieldwork took place, St Bernard's average A-level grade was published as C, compared to a national average of C+. Whilst not dramatically lower, this was achieved in part through preventing most of the lower achievers at year 12 (those gaining E grades and below) from progressing on to the second year of A-level study. In these cases, students would either restart year 12 at the school and study a BTEC qualification rather than A-levels or move to an alternative provider, normally a college.

St Bernard's seemed to have a generally good reputation within its community. It was among the top third of secondary schools within the borough in terms of its GCSE achievement and was rated "Outstanding" by Ofsted at the time fieldwork took place – although the report did note that there were issues related to sixth form academic outcomes. Teachers patrolled outside at the end of the school day to ensure that students crossed the busy road sensibly, and to move students along and prevent fights. This meant that the school had not developed the negative reputation of some in the area, where students tended to linger in groups, blocking the pavement and generally being teenagers. My impression was that, bar the usual griping, teachers generally liked working at St Bernard's, and staff morale was reasonably high.

The sixth form "team" was comprised of the two heads of sixth form, Mr Andrews and Mrs Lovell (both White and middle-aged), two assistant heads of sixth form, Mr Blake (White and in his twenties) and Ms Patel (South Asian and in her thirties), and two sixth form mentors, Ms Begum (South Asian and in her twenties) and Mr Lee (Chinese and in his twenties). These staff members (and I) were all based in the "sixth form centre" and, as well as having a weekly team meeting, were in frequent communication throughout the day. Mr Andrews and Ms Lovell also held a weekly meeting with the sixth form "tutor team" (all those with a sixth form tutor group), which tended to involve the distribution of notices as well as discussions about student attendance and behaviour. Whilst the head of sixth form job share was one of convenience rather than representing different responsibilities, Mr Andrews and Ms Lovell seemed to have carved out a (gendered) division of labour, with Mr Andrews taking greater responsibility for teaching and learning and disciplinary matters, and Ms Lovell more involved in the management of the tutorial programme and pastoral care.

Riverview College

Riverview College is in the London borough of Adley (a pseudonym). Like Marston, Adley is ethnically diverse, with high levels of deprivation. As in Marston, educational outcomes in Adley have improved hugely since the early 2000s, and the local authority is home to several schools rated "Outstanding" by Ofsted. At the time of my research, there were approximately a dozen school sixth forms, one sixth form college, and one further education college.

Riverview is further out from the city centre than St Bernard's and also sits on a busy main road. When the college was opened, there was a significant need for additional 16-19 places within the area. In the time since then, the educational landscape in the borough has changed, as several academies with their own sixth forms were established. This has created intense competition for sixth form students within the borough – a story familiar to many London

boroughs. At the time of fieldwork, the college exterior was covered in signs relating to prizes won by the college. However, these were all several years old, contributing to the college's rather tired appearance.

Riverview has approximately 1,200 students, mainly aged 16-19, with a small number of students aged 20 or over. Approximately a third of students are A-level students, with the rest studying Entry Level- Level 2 qualifications or Level 3 BTECs. Riverview is highly diverse: around 80% of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, with many students first generation immigrants, and a not insignificant number of students who are refugees. The college celebrated this diversity through many cultural events, often involving lunchtime performances in the canteen. Around a third of students were claiming FSM – a smaller proportion compared to the figure for St Bernard's (a whole school figure), possibly in part because of the relationship between FSM eligibility, GCSE achievement, and full-time education continuation. However, the college bursar told me that this figure underestimated the number of students from deprived backgrounds, as many students were unable to produce the necessary paperwork to process FSM or discretionary bursary requests, which she suspected was because of parents working in the shadow economy, possibly due to immigration statuses. She also noted that Riverview had a number of care leavers (young people who had been in local authority care and were living semi-independently), a particularly vulnerable group.

Students came to the college from a wide geographical area, largely because of its relatively low A-level entry requirements, and some students faced long commutes with multiple changes. A large number of A-level students at Riverview College had transferred there, having underachieved at other sixth forms. Riverview both accepted re-sit students and allowed students to progress to the second year of A-level study with lower grades than were allowed at other institutions, many school sixth forms requiring that students achieve at least a C or a D grade in order to progress[4]. This meant that it was sometimes thought of as a "second chance" institution. A-level results were below average, with a high proportion of students missing their target grades. When fieldwork took place, the average grade was D, compared to a national average of C+.

Riverview had a somewhat negative reputation, and many students knew of this when they enrolled: one interviewee told me that there was a stigma associated with attending the college. This may have been in part due to the college offering both academic and vocational courses which may have devalued it for "academic" students, and because of the relationship between

[4] There was a legal challenge to this practice of "off-rolling" in 2017. However, anecdotally, some sixth forms are simply using more creative methods to oust their underperforming students.

socioeconomic background and educational achievement, which meant that it had a particularly disadvantaged intake. Further, a number of students told me that the college was seen as "ghetto" or "rough" – i.e., dangerous. Whilst it is likely that such judgements were classed and racialised, the notion of Riverview as dangerous was not entirely unfounded: there had been a number of violent incidents at the college which had necessitated police involvement, and fights were not unusual. Further, students wearing the college's distinctive lanyard were often to be found hanging out in the vicinity of the college, not necessarily demonstrating high levels of respect for their environment or other people.

As Riverview is a sixth form college rather than school sixth form, there was not a sixth form "team" in the way that there was at St Bernard's, and there was a complex array of roles and responsibilities. Alongside form tutors, who theoretically oversaw their tutees' academic progress and were the first point of call for pastoral issues, students may have had involvement with senior tutors (who line managed tutors), heads of department (HODs), "achievement officers" (who were primarily involved with attendance and disciplinary matters), and staff within my team who, variously, had responsibility for enrichment activities, careers advice, work experience, UCAS, and safeguarding. Most A-level teachers (including senior tutors and HODs) were White, whilst support staff were from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Students' understanding of who was a "key" member of staff, beyond their own subject teachers, varied significantly from student to student. To illustrate, whilst some of the students I interviewed would have identified me as a key staff member – I might have taken them on a week-long residential, helped them with any number of pastoral issues, and provided intensive support with their UCAS application – others I had never previously met, and they seemingly did not know about the support I provided for students. Because of the disorganised nature of Riverview, relationships between non-teaching staff and students were often the result of happenstance.

Comparison of St Bernard's and Riverview College

St Bernard's and Riverview were in many ways very different. St Bernard's had a religious character; about 80% of St Bernard's Sixth Form's students had attended the school prior to sixth form; students were required to wear a uniform of business attire, strictly enforced; and students still had to call all staff members "Miss" and "Sir". This was in contrast to Riverview College, which was clearly secular; A-level students were generally new to the institution (although some did progress from the college's GCSE packages, mainly aimed at new entrants to the UK education system, or those with specific circumstances that meant they had not achieved

whilst at school); there was no uniform and students dressed as causally as they pleased; and students addressed teachers and other staff by their first names, at least where they knew these – the large staff body and high staff turnover meant that names often would not be known, so "Miss", "Sir" (or, indeed, occasionally, "Fam") were defaulted to.

The institutions each had a very different feel. At St Bernard's Sixth Form, students were regularly reminded that they must set an example for younger students. The school site was patrolled by teachers at break times and between lessons to ensure good behaviour and orderly transitions, and occasionally boisterous or over-exuberant behaviour tended to be quickly suppressed. Altercations were unusual and, when they did occur, the school buzzed with talk of them. There was a strictly enforced one way circulation route around the school site and a general sense of calm. Sixth formers were formally only allowed to leave the school site at lunch time. Riverview College, despite apparent student recruitment issues, often felt fit to burst. The "Walk on the left" signs were routinely ignored, and there was a sense of barely contained chaos as students streamed between lessons, pushing past one another, talking at loud volume, regularly stopping to high five or hug friends in the middle of corridors and walkways, the smell of fried chicken – the main product of the college's all-day canteen – thick in the air. There were no younger students for whom sixth formers ought to have been setting an example, and altercations were commonplace enough to warrant little discussion after they had been broken up. Students came and went as they pleased throughout the day, swiping their college ID cards for access through turnstiles. Whilst St Bernard's offered considerable continuity for students, Riverview represented a very new environment for students arriving from secondary school.

In the small St Bernard's Sixth Form, all students knew the sixth form leadership and support team. A member of the leadership team was positioned at the sixth form block entrance every morning to greet students (and check students' attire) and each afternoon to see them out. The sixth form team knew every student's name, had sometimes been teaching them for years, and often knew their siblings as well. Friendship fall-outs and students' budding relationships were known about and discussed by staff, who, generally, seemed to have a strong sense of pastoral responsibility. Along with a weekly tutor period, in theory if not always reality, students saw their form tutor for a 25-minute registration period every morning. In contrast, at the much larger Riverview College, many students were seemingly confused by the roles and responsibilities of staff members, and many staff members could not come close to personally knowing all the students they had some responsibility for. Rather, the "well-known" students were those who were particularly "problematic" in terms of behaviour or the attention they required, particularly high-achieving, or heavily involved with some aspect of college life, for

example, the Students' Union. Students were assigned to a form tutor for a weekly hour-long session timetabled as "Progress Review", but attendance tended to be poor.

Despite these stark differences in environment and atmosphere, similarities between the two institutions included a highly diverse student population; a high proportion of students eligible for free school meals; and a high percentage of EAL students. For each institution, these were not far from the averages for their respective boroughs. Both institutions saw high rates of progression to higher education. Essentially, St Bernard's and Riverview were serving not dissimilar students, and outcomes were fairly similar. Despite the different environments and atmospheres of St Bernard's Sixth Form and Riverview College, in both, students reported largely similar difficulties and struggles with regard to their A-level studies.

Ethnographic fieldwork

Whilst "ethnography" is understood in a variety of different ways (Skeggs, 2001), a number of common features can be identified. Ethnography generally involves the study of people in everyday contexts, over an extended period of time, with data drawn from a variety of sources; data collection is relatively unstructured, inductive and qualitative in nature; and the analysis of data involves the interpretation of social action and institutional practices, producing largely textual descriptions, explanations, and theories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The value of ethnography lies in these different features: it is naturalistic; provides the possibility of a temporal understanding of the group or phenomenon in question; offers a "holism" often lacking in other methodologies; and provides data that are embedded in context, allowing "thick" description (Geertz, 1973), making a substantive contribution to the understanding of the lived realities of participants. These merits have contributed to a strong history of ethnographic research in studies of education and schooling (for example, Gillborn, 1990; Sewell, 1997; Willis, 2000; Khan, 2011; Kulz, 2017).

My position within both St Bernard's and Riverview College was largely that of participant observer, though, on certain occasions, my role was closer to that of non-participant observer. My roles obviously differed somewhat between the two sites due to my paid role at Riverview, where I was most definitely an "insider"; although I became something of an insider at St Bernard's too.

I found a "role" at St Bernard's by offering academic support, providing assistance with UCAS applications, and, often, being an "extra body" – several times, I was asked to contribute to the

staff-to-student ratio accompanying a trip or supervising an activity. I tutored a small number of students in A-level sociology/psychology on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and was able to form particularly close relationships with these students, all but one of whom consented to me including my observations of our sessions as data. Taking on these roles not only enabled me to develop closer relationships with students and to make myself useful in the eyes of sixth form staff but "gave back" to participants through helping them with their studies and progression.

I told all of the students I worked with about my position as a researcher and the nature of my research – that I was interested in A-level achievement in London and the factors that might hold some students back from achieving. Whilst I had imagined that this might produce a degree of mistrust or a sense of self-consciousness, in fact, students were generally curious, and many wanted to contribute their "hypotheses". Students often expressed the hope that my work, which they had contributed to, might one day end up in a school sociology textbook, and I often sensed that students felt flattered by my interest in them. My position as a researcher also identified me as distinct from the sixth-form staff members, who, as well as supporting students, disciplined them. This meant that students were more likely to be open with me, and some students clearly saw me as something of a confidante.

My role allowed for observation of students, particularly within the "sixth form centre" – a large workspace equipped with PCs and desk space, an all-day café, and the sixth form team's offices – and direct involvement with students' learning. I also had innumerable informal conversations with students regarding their experiences within education, their plans for the future, and their lives more generally, providing rich data. I regularly ate lunch with students in the café and developed particularly friendly relationships with a number of female students with whom I chatted about romantic relationships, music, and television, and who sought to educate me regarding hair and make-up.

My (paid) role at Riverview College involved assisting with the management of the UCAS process, organising and supervising enrichment activities, and coordinating a higher education insight programme that operated across the borough, as well as responsibilities shared by all staff members, including supervising study spaces and break duties. There was a strong tradition of staff practitioner research at the college, and both students and my colleagues were aware that I was undertaking PhD research. Whilst being a paid staff member obviously entails other responsibilities, there were similarities to my time at St Bernard's sixth form: I was around students every day, directly involved in their learning, and, due to my role in organising and supervising enrichment activities, I was often in the position to chat to and develop more

informal relationships with students, including on long minivan journeys (one infamous journey between Oxford and Riverview taking six hours) and several residentials. As a member of support rather than teaching staff, I remained outside of the category of staff members whom students might have antagonistic relationships with.

Throughout my research, I made fieldnotes by hand in a notebook or emailed myself notes when there was enough privacy at a PC. I regularly asked students "would you mind if I wrote that down?" and several students teased me for this, joking that I must have a very poor memory. I tried to write up fieldnotes on a daily basis when I was home, though was often too tired to manage this, and would then need to "catch up" later in the week. When appropriate, I recorded quotations into the speech recorder on my mobile phone in order to capture speech as accurately as possible. Depictions of speech throughout the thesis are explained later.

When I was first planning my research, I had hoped to be able to carry out classroom observations – an ethnographic activity known to be particularly challenging (Becker, 1971). However, because lesson observations are primarily used for performance management, they are often a source of considerable teacher anxiety and are frequently regarded as an unwelcome intrusion. I therefore decided against gaining access to classrooms through the senior management team. Several teachers offered to allow me to observe their classrooms, but I decided that taking up a position normally associated with senior teachers could upset my developing relationships with students. Further, I recognised that I would have little way of knowing how representative a small number of observed lessons were of teaching practices within the school more generally, particularly as the teachers who offered to host me were probably those who were the most confident in their teaching and who had good relationships with their classes. Additionally, by sixth-form, students' engagement in independent work outside of the classroom is enormously important to their achievement.

Interviews

The centrality of participants' accounts is a key feature of ethnography (Walford, 2008), and collecting data via both interviews and observation offers the advantage of increasing the likelihood of achieving more rounded, valid interpretations (Bhatti, 1999). Holstein and Gubrium suggest that, simply put, interviewing "provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (2003: 2). Epistemologically, qualitative methods assert that we should not assume the viewpoint of the actor, and that to

understand their actions and the reasons behind these, we should only attribute to them ideas that they actually possess (Becker, 1996) – a clear argument for the use of interviews. Qualitative research interviews tend to seek to cover both a "factual" level and a "meaning" level (Kvale, 1996).

At the request of the St Bernard's heads of sixth form, at the start of the year I completed structured, "snapshot" interviews with all year 12 students (BTEC as well as A-level), asking about activities they hoped to participate in, academic concerns, and further study and career plans. As these interviews were "commissioned" by the school and I did not seek to gain students' informed consent to participate, I have not included this data in my thesis. However, these interviews provided some useful context and enabled me to meet and individually introduce myself to all of the new year 12s. This was the basis for developing relationships with a number of year 12 students who demonstrated interest in my research or recognised that I might be able to support them in some way.

As well as numerous informal conversations with students and with their teachers and other staff members, I carried out semi-structured interviews with 26 students. The audio quality of two of these was too poor to transcribe, so 24 interviews made it into my data. The characteristics of my sample are captured in the following table:

Name	GCSE achievement	A-level year	Ethnicity	EAL?	FSM?	Parental occupation
St Bernard's						
Alistair	Very high	1	Black African	No	No	Business
Chelsea	High	2	White British	No	No	Builder
Fahim	High	1	Bangladeshi	Yes	No	Restaurant industry
Katie	Moderate	2	White British	No	Yes	Canteen worker
Laura	Lower	1 (retaking)	Vietnamese	Yes	No	Nail technician
Lejila	Very high	2	Eastern European	Yes	No	Painter decorator
Natalie	Moderate	2	White and Black Caribbean	No	Yes	Administration
Paul	Moderate	2	Black Caribbean	No	No	Sports coach
Simarjit	Moderate	2	Indian	No	No	Business
Tara	Moderate	2	Black Caribbean	No	No	Admin
Tolu	Lower	1	Black African	No	No	Hospital assistant
Riverview						
Abdullah	Moderate	2 (retook first year)	Black African	Yes	Yes	Lived with other relatives
Alexandra	Moderate	1	Black African	Yes	No	Administration
Amy	Very high	1 (retaking)	White and Black Caribbean	No	No	Supermarket cashier
Dawit	Lower	1	Black African	No	Yes	Unemployed
Fawzia	Lower	2 (retook first year)	Black African	Yes	No	Business
Habiba	Lower	1	Black African	Yes	Yes	Mother unable to work
Hamza	High	2 (retook first year)	Bangladeshi	No	No	Restaurant owner
Ibrahim	Very high	2 (retaking)	Pakistani	Yes	No	Taxi driver
Jamila	Very high	2 (retaking)	Black African	Yes	No	Business
Maruan	Lower	2	Arabic	Yes	Yes	Warehouse operative
Regina	Moderate	1	Eastern European	Yes	No	Cleaner
Samilaah	Moderate	1 (retaking)	Indian	Yes	No	Social care
Zeynep	High	2 (retaking)	Turkish	Yes	No	Business

All names are pseudonyms

GCSE achievement was classified according to students' mean GCSE scores and is not tied to national achievement. Generally, achievement within these categories was as follows:

Very high: At least two A*s, As, and Bs

High: Mainly Bs, possibly with As and Cs

Moderate: Mainly Cs

Lower: Mainly Cs, with Ds and possibly lower

The ethnic and gendered patterns of GCSE achievement discussed in Chapter 1 were not particularly pronounced amongst A-level students at either site. As girls did do considerably better than boys at GCSE at St Bernard's, the minimal gender difference amongst sixth formers is likely because most of the higher achieving female students left for an alternative sixth form. Amongst A-level students at Riverview (which included students who had achieved highly at GCSE but underachieved in the first or second year at A-level), GCSE mean point scores were quite close, but boys were more likely to be retaking GCSE English. Amongst a highly diverse and relatively small population, it was not possible to discern obvious ethnic differences in GCSE achievement amongst A-level students at either site.

I have provided the occupation of the parent that interviewees identified as the main earner. This was normally their father, though nine of my interviewees lived in single parent families. Many of my interviewees had difficulty identifying what their parents did for work so some "parental occupations" are approximations and do not necessarily tell us very much – for example, Jamila described her father as being "*in business*" but "*not in a high up way*". He was not a business owner, and I took Jamila's comment to suggest that this may have involved more routine work. I also asked about parents' level of education, which, again, proved difficult for most of my interviewees. A couple of students thought that a parent may have completed a degree "back home", but only one student knew that their parent held a degree – Hamza's mother had completed her degree whilst he was at secondary school and he had attended her graduation. Several students noted that their parents had received very little formal education. In order to get a greater sense of interviewees' socioeconomic backgrounds, I also asked about their housing tenure and looked at postcode data. Only two students (Alistair and Hamza) lived in homes their families owned (although both stressed that these were modest homes, and Alistair shared a bedroom with his younger brother). All students lived in postcodes with the

Acorn categories “Urban Adversity” and “Financially Stretched”. Only five of my students were in receipt of free school meals suggesting that these students were underrepresented. However, a sizeable proportion of FSM pupils at both institutions were completing BTECs rather than A-levels.

My interview sample was purposive, with all students interviewed either having already underachieved at AS/A-level, or predicted to – i.e., performance was less good or was predicted to be less good than target minimum grades based on the Advance Level Performance System (ALPS), which uses national data to predict A-level grades based on GCSE performance. I considered it advantageous that many of my Riverview participants had attended a different sixth form prior to Riverview, lending greater diversity to students’ sixth form experiences. Some of the students I knew well prior to interviewing, whilst others I had encountered only briefly. One of my Riverview participants I met for the first time when he came to see me to volunteer to be interviewed, having heard about my research from a friend. Prior “acquaintanceship” is likely to be pertinent in research interviews (Garton and Copland, 2010). Mercer (2007) suggests that advantages of this include familiarity, rapport, and shared references, whilst disadvantages include the researcher’s preconceptions and those of the participants about the researcher. My professional experience, along with shared frames of reference – for example, my knowing names and roles of teachers within the school – reduced the need to interrupt students for clarification, enhancing the flow of the interview.

After conducting three exploratory “pilot” interviews with students at St Bernard’s, I developed my interview schedule using existing research on educational engagement and education inequalities, along with some of my early observations from fieldwork. Whilst the structure of the research interview is similar to that of a routine conversation, it also involves specific techniques of questioning (Kvale, 1996). I began by asking students to tell me about themselves and their backgrounds, which provided context for the rest of the interview. I then asked students to tell me all about their experiences of schooling. Such open-ended questions allow for respondent self-expression: a key reason for choosing to use qualitative interviews with young people is to provide this opportunity, adult interpretations of the lives of young people normally dominating (Eder and Fingerson, 2003).

My semi-structured interviews were wide-ranging, and covered the following areas:

- **Background information** (example questions: To start with, could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your background? Whereabouts do you live, and who with? What do your parents do for a living?)
- **Prior school experience** (example questions: What was your school experience like? What were the good bits? Were there bits you didn't enjoy? Were your parents much involved with your school/ education? In what ways?)
- **Sixth form choice and perceptions** (example questions: Why did you choose to come here? What do you think of it? What do you think of the other students?)
- **A-level subject choices** (example questions: Why/how did you choose your A-level courses? What did you know about your subjects at A-level when you chose them? What's your favourite subject so far? Least favourite? Why?)
- **Teaching and learning** (example questions: What's different about A-levels compared to GCSEs? Are the teaching and learning styles different? How? How have you coped with these differences? What kinds of teaching/ lessons do you find most helpful? Least helpful?)
- **School social life** (example questions: What do you think of your social life here? Do you think your social life is helpful or unhelpful in terms of your learning and achievement?)
- **Spare time** (example questions: What do you do outside of school? Do you have any particular responsibilities at home/ for your family? Have these changed over time? Do you do anything that supports your studies?)
- **University** (example questions: Do you plan to go to university? When did you first start thinking about university? How much do you know about university?)
- **Careers** (example questions: What would you like to do after university? Do you know much about the job/industry you're interested in? When did you first think about this career? What makes you want to pursue that particular career?)

See Appendix 1 for a fuller outline of the questions asked.

The extent to which I followed the interview schedule was dependent on the way in which the interview unfolded, with issues contained within the guide often addressed organically. Were the issues not addressed within my participants' responses to more open questions, direct, specific questions were asked regarding issues of interest. Interview length ranged from an hour and a half to two and a half hours, and allowed for exploration of, for example, students' educational histories, how students saw themselves in relation to education, their feelings

regarding their A-levels, the difficulties that they might have been experiencing, and their plans for the future.

Interviewees chose the location of the interview. Most of my interviews with St Bernard's students took place in a quiet café near the school. Most of my Riverview interviews took place in an office or classroom after the end of the college day. For me, the most important consideration was privacy – that our conversation would not be overheard – but being able to buy my interviewee a drink and a slice of cake provided an agreeable start to the interviews that took place in the café.

Hammersley and Atkinson note that a dilemma faced by ethnographers during fieldwork "is deciding how much self-disclosure is appropriate or fruitful. It is hard to expect 'honesty' and 'frankness' on the part of participants and informants, while never being frank and honest about oneself." (2007: 72). What Abell et al. (2006) describe as "strategic self-disclosure" can help to develop rapport with interviewees, although it is not without risk (ibid). Informed by a feminist commitment to reciprocity, whilst also mindful of the need to maintain a professional demeanour, I fairly frequently made disclosures of shared experiences with my student participants, for example, noting that I had experienced periods at risk of school exclusion because of my poor attendance. The students involved in my research were often somewhat incredulous about this and such disclosures often generated meaningful conversations about school engagement.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, mainly professionally – having intended to transcribe interviews myself, I paid to have this done professionally after finding that it was taking me a disproportionate length of time. After receiving the transcripts, I relistened to the interviews and corrected the transcripts accordingly.

Depictions of speech throughout the thesis

In order to distinguish between "representations" of speech – that is, speech recorded in my fieldnotes, or that I attempted to repeat into my recorder – and speech lifted from interview transcripts, all quotations from interview transcripts are in italic.

I have used ellipses to indicate where, for reasons of space or relevance, I have omitted speech. I have used em dashes where a participant trails off or changes direction mid-sentence.

Occasionally, I have indicated non-verbal communication, such as laughter, in square brackets. Where I have added any words to enhance readability, these are in italic in square brackets. Where I think (or my supervisors have commented) that speech requires clarification or explanations, these are in square brackets and in standard type.

Other data sources

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that documents and artefacts may help to shed light on a research topic. I made use of a range of publicly available documents about both research sites, including school policies and Ofsted reports. I was also granted access to both institutions' internal data, and a wide range of internal documents, for example, learning walk reports, ALPS reports, and university destinations data, as well as materials provided to students, such as behaviour expectations and uniform policy. These documents provided valuable context for my research.

Analysis

Hammersley and Atkinson note that within ethnography, data analysis does not form a distinct stage of the research process:

"In many ways, it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles, and books. Formally, it starts to take shape in analytic notes and memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches. And in these ways, to one degree or another, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection." (2007: 158)

Fieldnotes were typed up after school and involved an active process of interpretation and sense-making of anything that appeared "significant" (Emerson et al., 2011). Themes which had not necessarily been evident to me at the time, in-situ, often emerged during the process of re-reading my diary and typing up my notes. My data analysis was largely thematic but drew on the grounded theory approach, with emerging analysis guiding the collection of further data (Ezzy, 2002). In the pre-fieldwork phase, I was potentially too focused on cultural capital and habitus, but, once I began my fieldwork, I saw the importance of a greater range of issues. This approach necessitated movement back and forth with the literature – for example, seeing students' fear of failure emerging as an important theme encouraged me to search the literature

for accounts of this phenomenon. This led me to a body of literature primarily from a different discipline: the literature on motivation and mindsets.

My interview data analysis involved several stages, largely following the thematic analysis guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involved familiarising myself with the data in order to support its coding — that is, assigning "shorthand" designations to the data, making it easier to retrieve specific parts (Merriam, 2009). Boyatzis (1998) identifies three stages of coding, which he describes as first, second, and third order staging. First order staging involved line by line reading and annotation with initial codes. Second order staging involved grouping these initial codes into more meaningful categories – for example, "knowledge" and "teachers". Third order staging involved the analysis of codes, looking for overarching themes – for example, "cultural capital". Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers then ought to review and refine themes, considering both internal consistency and external diversity – that is, that there is coherence in the data within themes, and that there are clear distinctions between themes – before finally defining and naming themes to capture the "essence" of each theme. These have helped to provide the structure of my thesis.

Through combining observation and interviews, I came to see the importance of a wide range of factors that contributed to student (dis)engagement and (under)achievement.

Positionality and reflexivity

Positionality refers to the researcher's worldview, the position that they adopt in relation to their work, and their position in relation to identity categories – as Ezzy (2002) notes, research that claims to be uninfluenced by the researcher and objective is deceptive. Reflexivity should be considered important in all research but perhaps particularly so in ethnography (Richardson, 2000). The researcher must critically consider how decisions made during fieldwork affect the data; how their characteristics might shape the way in which participants respond to them; and the way in which their personal experiences and beliefs may shape their interpretations.

In research within a school, the researcher has to tread a fine line in terms of building and maintaining positive and trusting relationships with students, beyond those of most student-teacher relationships, whilst maintaining a professional identity, and ensuring continued access to and the cooperation of the school. As a middle-class, highly educated, White woman, and as

an educational professional, it is important to be mindful of how these characteristics may have influenced interactions and relationships with participants, particularly the largely working-class, minority ethnic young people involved in the research, and I have sought to consider this throughout. Whilst there are queries around the possibility or desirability of researcher-participant "matching" (Sin, 2007), researchers should be conscious of how their particular characteristics may mean, for example, participants conceive of some topics to be "off limits". In the case of my research, this could mean, for example, participants not wanting to talk about issues of "race". However, many participants raised issues of "race" and racism over the course of their interviews, so I am not sure that this was necessarily an issue.

I am conscious of how gender shaped my fieldwork. At St Bernard's, I developed close relationships with many more female than male students. This was in part an outcome of gendered A-level subject choices: girls were more likely to be studying social science and humanities subjects, and boys were more likely to be studying STEM subjects. As I could only offer academic support within social science and humanities subjects, this meant that I spent more time with female students and female students were more likely to approach me for help. It was also the outcome of the way I was gendered – for example, there were several occasions where Mr Andrews asked for me to take over in relation to a pastoral issue with a female student. This gender effect was less obvious at Riverview, where, interestingly, I probably had more close relationships with male than female students. Gender can significantly influence interview dynamics (Lefkowich, 2019), and a couple of my male interviewees were noticeably slightly tense, at least for the first twenty minutes or so. This may, however, have been an outcome of the novelty of the situation as opposed to a necessarily gendered dynamic. One very noticeable gendered difference in my interview data is in relation to mental health, which was raised by most female interviewees but only one male interviewee. This may reflect women's greater propensity to discuss their emotions and mental health, or may relate to a cross-gender interview dynamic.

In the interest of researcher openness, there are a number of points about myself and my experiences that I think it is important to make as they likely shaped my research.

I hated school and, from year ten onwards, was persistently truant. I found it difficult to tolerate the environment of the school, its rules, a number of my peers, and most of the teachers – I had a couple of excellent teachers whose lessons I would reliably attend. I achieved highly in secondary education *despite* rather than because of my school. Of course, I did not have this language to express my frustrations at the time, but, in Bernsteinian terms, the school combined

strong regulative discourse with weak instructional discourse – in other words, it was very strict with lots of petty rules, but teaching was poor, and many students, myself included, learnt very little. I have always been very aware that I was able to do well at school because of my middle-class home background, and I knew that I was lucky to have a mother well-equipped to fight my corner with the school. This – along with the school's expectations of my high grades – meant that I did not get kicked out. Along with my political commitment to social equality, my experiences of schooling have made me sympathetic to students' experiences of poorly prepared teachers and what Lingard (2009) describes as "pedagogies of indifference".

However, despite my considerable care for and empathy with students, my work is also shaped by my professional experience of working with A-level students for over a decade. I have great respect for teachers working in disadvantaged inner-city settings, and I know just how challenging that can be. Both my professional experience and my "embeddedness" within my research sites have enabled me to scrutinise students' claims rather than always taking these at face value.

Finally, I have found the process of writing this PhD incredibly challenging, have been beset by feelings of intellectual inferiority and self-doubt, and have regularly felt utterly overwhelmed. This has given me something of an unexpected insight into the way that some of the young people involved my research experienced A-levels. This has possibly enhanced my understanding of some of the counterproductive academic behaviours that I have observed in my own students and that have been discussed by participants in my research. Whilst in the past I may have dismissed some of these as representing laziness, I now have far greater empathy!

Ethical considerations

Whilst all researchers ought to be attentive to research ethics, this is a particular priority given the age of participants in educational research. My project's participants were aged 16-19. The British Sociological Association (2002) research ethics framework was followed. This meant, for example, that research was overt, students informed of my research interest in post-16 engagement and achievement, and interviewees completed informed consent forms. These were written in clear, untechnical language, appropriate for and unintimidating to my teenage participants (see Appendix 2).

I have sought to protect the identities of both my research sites and individuals featured within the research. The research sites, participants, and all individuals referenced by participants have been given pseudonyms. To further protect the identities of teachers, I have used appropriately vague descriptors – for example, I have replaced specific subjects with "humanities", "sciences" or "arts" in both references to teachers and in students' speech, aside from where this would obscure meaning.

All interviewees were informed that our discussions would be confidential, the only exception to this being if I had safeguarding concerns, which I would be obligated to pass on. This was not a situation which ever arose. I was concerned that I might face some kind of moral dilemma in terms of, for example, information shared about the behaviour of a teacher within the school – as Mercer (2007) notes, ethical dilemmas take on particular significance for insider researchers. However, again, this was not a situation that arose.

A number of students that I requested to interview refused, and others simply didn't show up at the arranged time – an occupational hazard of research with teenagers. If a student seemed uncertain about participating, I was cautious to ensure that I did not pressurise them to do so. However, in these cases, where a student had made a remark that I had found particularly interesting, I did ask if they were happy for me to note this down, which, on all but one occasion, was accepted. This sometimes developed into interesting conversations, which I made notes on afterwards. Bassett et al. (2008) note that one of the many methodological challenges of interviewing teenagers is their being intimidated by the use of a recorder, and some students did seem disconcerted by the idea of me recording our conversation, with one student telling me, "Nah, Miss; I'm not about that. I'd rather just chat to you."

It should be noted that a research interview is not an open dialogue between equal partners (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Rather, it amounts to "a specific professional conversation with a clear asymmetry between the researcher and the subject" (ibid: 18). However, this power can shift between interviewer and interviewee in what Hoffman (2007) describes as the "interview dance". Whilst, clearly, in many respects, I held the power, interviewees were able to cancel the interview, to rebuff or refuse to answer questions, and to steer the interview round to areas of greater interest to them.

Because of their age, young people are particularly vulnerable to exploitation within research. In line with the feminist emphasis on reciprocity (Skeggs, 2001), I wanted to ensure that my research offered some benefit to participants. From experience, young people enjoy the

opportunity to talk about their lives and their views, and my role has been one where I am actively involved in supporting young people. In several interviews, at what I had thought was the end, students sought advice regarding university, or revealed concerns about their achievement, and, because of my professional experience, I was able to provide support.

Limitations

Whilst I consider the data collected and my analysis to be robust, it is important to also consider limitations of any research.

At both St Bernard's and Riverview, I had much more contact with students than teachers as teachers are very busy during the course of the school day. Neither site had a "staff room" as such, but, rather, offices divided according to year group or responsibilities. Particularly at St Bernard's where there was a separate "sixth form centre", I had considerable contact with the sixth form team, but relatively little contact with other teaching staff – beyond the couple of staff members I developed friendships with. I had dozens of conversations with teaching staff about my research and about the "problem" of A-level underachievement, but did not formally interview teachers. This was primarily because I had not mentioned any intention of interviewing teachers when I had negotiated access and was worried that introducing the idea could in some way upset my position – that my "gatekeeper" would be suspicious in some way. However, in retrospect, I think that my research would have benefitted from formal interviews with A-level teachers.

I had intended to carry out further interviews with students, and my relatively small sample is the outcome of the aforementioned difficulty of teenager unreliability along with my determination to ensure that I did not put any student under any pressure to participate if they were uncertain. However, it seemed that I may have reached thematic saturation, and this was supported by my (often lengthy) informal conversations (or "ethnographic interviews") with dozens more students, where I often sought to gain their views on my research topic.

Concluding comments

In this chapter I have introduced my research sites and described my methodological approach. Recognising the importance of reflexivity, particularly for ethnography, I have sought to explain my own position and to consider how my characteristics, decisions, and experiences may have shaped my data and analysis. I have discussed the ethical considerations of my research, and considered its possible limitations. This chapter concludes the first part of my thesis.

Chapter 4: Transitions

Points of educational transition, particularly for young adults, can represent what Giddens described as "fateful moments ... when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives" (1991: 112). This chapter will consider student transition to A-level at Riverview College and St Bernard's. The first part of the chapter will discuss the context in and the processes by which students choose the sixth form to attend. The second part of the chapter will consider students' choice of A-level subjects. The third part of the chapter will focus on the "early days" of sixth form. Each of these have implications for students' engagement and achievement at A-level.

Part I: choice of sixth form

The context and process of post-16 choices

Much sociological work in the past highlighted how full-time education continuation may be seen as "natural" for the middle-classes whilst leaving in favour of employment or training may be perceived to be "common-sense" for working-class groups, thus demonstrating different habitus orientations. However, as the number of young people staying on in full-time, post-compulsory education has risen, this has changed. A higher proportion of students remain in post-16 full-time education in London than is the case nationally, and for many working-class urban young people, remaining in education is absolutely taken for granted. This is partly related to ethnicity, with minority ethnic groups continuing longer in full-time education compared to their White British counterparts (Allen et al., 2016) and may also reflect the institutional habitus of London schools.

As well as being more likely to remain in full-time education, students in London are presented with a large number of post-16 providers to choose between, in a varied post-16 education "market" consisting of school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, and further education colleges. The variety of routes and options that young people can take at age 16 leads to the inevitable potential for the significant over-supply of post-16 places in London: post-16 places are harder to plan for than primary and secondary places (London Councils, 2017). This means that many

institutions are in competition for the number of students required to maintain viability. Both Riverview and St Bernard's can be thought of as "recruiting" institutions in that they are seeking to attract students rather than selecting them, and they typically end up with spaces available.

Young people are expected to use all the information available to them to act as "good consumers" in the post-16 market. As noted by Bloomer and Hodkinson, "much published work is based upon assumptions that [learning] careers are determined by a succession of choices based upon an objective knowledge of both self and the options available" (1997: 6). I will show that this is clearly flawed, and many of the young people featured in my research lacked the inclination or capacity to act as what Ball and Vincent (1998) described as "privileged/skilled choosers". Instead, they corresponded largely to the "disconnected choosers" of their typology. Further, with post-16 providers able to set their own entry requirements and the sector increasingly selective, this "market" exacerbates inequalities and excludes. Working-class and certain minority ethnic young people are especially likely to be at the sharp end of this system, particularly in the context of students receiving little support around post-16 progression. Whilst there has been a statutory requirement for schools to deliver impartial careers education since 2008, including in relation to post-16 options, many students involved in my research apparently received little support around post-16 progression. This is an outcome of resource and time issues, along with institutional pressures.

Responsibility for delivery of information, advice and guidance (IAG) was transferred from local authorities (via Connexions) to schools in 2012 as a result of coalition government cuts, though justified by some ongoing criticisms of the Connexions service. However, schools were not provided with additional funding to fulfil their new responsibilities. St Bernard's did put aside time for "progression planning" for year 11s, as did most secondary schools according to students' accounts: only a couple of students reported that they had received *no* IAG, and this may have been due to absence. However, allocated time was normally within "tutor time", and tutors do not necessarily have the relevant expertise or sufficient time to provide high-quality support to their tutees. The focus in year 11 is very much on exam success, and, in the average state secondary, this does not allow for much time to be dedicated to progression advice or planning. The 2012 changes have resulted in an overall reduction in the provision of IAG in schools (Evans and Rallings, 2013), and for most students, IAG related to progression is likely to be restricted to tutor periods and a small number of assemblies delivered by the "Careers lead" or external visitors, and, in my experience, these may primarily constitute a box-ticking exercise.

Along with time and resource issues, there may be institutional pressures working against the provision of impartial IAG. Research queries the ability of schools to provide unbiased advice

(ibid), particularly in the context of heavy competition for students (Blenkinsop et al., 2006), and teachers may push young people towards decisions that are primarily in the school's interests because of its own market needs (Foskett and Maringe, 2005). Further, teachers – who are, after all, not trained career specialists – may lack up-to-date knowledge of the post-16 options and pathways available. Generally, those students who are considered likely to achieve the grades required to progress to the school sixth form are encouraged to discount other options – it is to secondary schools' advantage to present their own sixth form as the de facto choice, and they have considerable control over the information that students receive, which is of particular relevance for less "skilled" choosers. For those students who are unlikely to achieve highly enough to transfer to their school sixth form, the aim is just that they have "somewhere to go", whether this is education, employment, or training. The overriding concern is that they do not end up not in education, employment, or training (NEET): the percentage of students who are in education or employment six months after finishing Key Stage 4 is published in performance tables and is used by the Department for Education as an accountability tool. For both groupings of year 11 students – those who are expected to be able to progress to the school sixth form and those who are not – there tends to be a lack of institutional incentive or capacity for the provision of high-quality IAG.

Whilst schools are expected to provide progression IAG, it is, in the end, students' responsibility to research and apply for sixth form places. At both sixth forms, and, indeed, across the sector, there is an official process of application, acceptance, and course selection, which is designed to take place across many months and to be protracted, considered, and rational. In this idealised version, a prospective student carries out research (consulting websites, prospectuses, and league tables) and visits several providers for open evenings during the Autumn term, or early on in Spring term. During these open evenings, they are given a tour of the building, possibly attend a welcome talk with a senior staff member, potentially attend "subject demonstrations", and chat to subject teachers, key members of the sixth form staff team, and current sixth formers.

Having engaged in this process of research and decided on the sixth form that they wish to attend – this based on the curriculum offer, environment, and performance – they are likely to submit an application form, including personal and demographic details, predicted grades, and details for a referee from their current school, who can comment on the suitability of their course choices. If they are considered a "good" applicant – i.e., they are likely to meet the sixth form's entry requirements – they will be invited for an interview with a sixth form staff member. Generally, such interviews are scheduled to be about twenty minutes long, and the prospective student is asked to indicate their course choices from the "option blocks". At most

institutions, students' combination of A-level subjects is limited by such option blocks: subjects are pre-assigned to timetable blocks, with students picking a subject from 3 or 4 blocks. Prospective students may be asked questions to determine the appropriateness of their subject choices. They also have the opportunity to ask questions about the institution and potential courses, and to receive advice. If the student's course choices are deemed appropriate, mirroring the language used by universities, they will then be provided with a "Conditional Offer", which states that, providing they achieve the requisite GCSE results, they will have a place at the sixth form to begin their A-levels in September.

The process is designed in this way to allow for a two-way selection dynamic: students are to select a sixth form that is appropriate for them, in which they have the best possible chances of success, and, in theory, institutions are attempting to select students who have the motivation, commitment, and ability to succeed with their chosen A-levels within the sixth form environment offered. However, for a variety of reasons, this idealised version is markedly different from the actual process by which many students end up taking a place at Riverview or St Bernard's, which, particularly at Riverview, is often late in the admissions cycle, shortly before or even after the start of the academic year. Whilst the process is intended to be protracted, considered, and rational, for many students it is hasty, ill-considered, and, thus, possibly, irrational. The following section will outline how and why students enrol at Riverview and St Bernard's and will consider some of the resulting implications.

Riverview

Riverview theoretically subscribed to minimum entry requirements for its A-level courses – that is, five GCSE grades at A*-C (9-4 in the new grading system), including one of English language or maths, with a remaining GCSE to be studied alongside the A-level courses, as is a requirement for students throughout post-16 education. These entry requirements, some of the lowest in the sector, were stressed by the college principal as crucial to the comprehensive nature of the college, a core value of Riverview, and non-negotiable. However, teaching staff involved in student interviews and enrolment could be found to use a variety of subtle strategies to dissuade students from particular subjects on the basis of prior achievement or, possibly, prejudice, as will be illustrated in Part II. As well as having comparably low entry requirements for students to access A-levels, Riverview was prepared to accept students who had been asked to leave other providers, allowing students to retake a year or to progress to year 2 with grades that may have been considered unacceptable elsewhere.

Students who enrolled at Riverview tended to do so as a result of the absence of alternative choices (at least to study A-levels) or because of "push" factors as opposed to the "pull" of the college: they had been pushed out of other institutions either as a result of not attaining, or as a result of specific circumstances – for example, friendship difficulties or bullying, mentioned by several female students. Many students only came to Riverview post-results when they realised that they did not have the grades to attend their school sixth form or other first choice option. Students who enrolled at Riverview in the absence of other choices tended to have heard about Riverview "through the grapevine": from friends, relatives, or social media. The "hot" knowledge of the "grapevine" (although this is more accurately plural) can represent a crucial source of information for school choosers, particularly for those who may lack the cultural capital to "decode" official, "cold" knowledge (Vincent and Ball, 1998). Sometimes "referral" to Riverview was accompanied by information regarding its negative reputation, but some students were entirely unaware of this when they enrolled.

Regina enrolled at Riverview having first applied for and attended an interview at a sixth form college that was both more local to her and more prestigious than Riverview:

"*Upperly College is not far from my house but I didn't want to go there because when I went on an interview, the interviewer was quite rude to me. He was saying stuff like that I will not pass my exams and he said there was no point enrolling me to do A-Levels and all that kind of stuff. When I came for the interview here, the teacher that was interviewing me was really nice and I just really liked her*." – Regina, Riverview

Whilst Regina's predicted GCSE grades met the entry requirements to access A-levels at Upperly College, she was predicted middling grades, and we can see how efforts may be made to discourage such moderate-attainers from pursuing A-levels – most providers offer BTEC options alongside A-levels, and moderate achievers may be encouraged towards the "vocational", based on the belief that they will secure higher grades than they would at A-level, to the benefit of the institution's league table position. Alongside the interviewer's evaluation of Regina's (lack of) institutionalised cultural capital, embodied cultural capital is also implicated. Ball notes that there are "*key points of articulation* in the choice process when certain kinds of cultural capital are crucial" (1993: 13, emphasis original), and Regina did not understand the "rules of the game" or how to advocate for herself. The contrast between Regina's interview experiences meant that she was grateful to be met with kindness at Riverview and did not carry out further research (which might have led her to discover Riverview's reputation) or consider alternative sixth form options, which she regretted.

Samilaah ended up attending Riverview by accident: it was the only remaining reasonably local sixth form college where she could gain a place, her options being limited to colleges rather than school sixth forms because of her moderate attainment at GCSE:

"I didn't even apply to Riverview, and Riverview was my very last option. And the reason being was because I went off on holiday back home [India, her father's country of birth]*, and my sister forgot to enrol me in my two top colleges. So, when I came back enrolment in those two colleges had finished and they weren't accepting anyone else, so then Riverview was my last option."* – Samilaah, Riverview

This led to Samilaah attending a college that she never would have positively chosen as she described initially finding the atmosphere very intimidating.

Maruan had planned to attend the sixth form of his secondary school. However, he missed the necessary GCSE English language grade by one mark:

"*Because I got the grades for maths, and I got the grades for every subject. All I needed was that C in English. And she* [a senior teacher] *said to me, 'no you can't, you're going to have to look for somewhere else, you can't'. And I said, 'but look, you just told me I'm one mark off a C. So, I'll settle for a remark, what are the chances of me getting that C? It's quite high, clearly'. And then she said that 'no-no-no-no, you've got to look for another school. If you want to do something, you've got to do BTEC'. But in my mindset, I didn't want to do BTEC… And at that point, I knew that the school didn't want to accept me because of my background. I saw it as that, as well as my grades. Because I was in the same situation in another student that had, his parents were English, and he was in my same situation, and he was allowed to do all A levels. And when they've looked at me and they saw my mum it just – So, I waited two weeks and I got my C. So, I came back to the school and I was like, 'I got my grades and I got my C in English. I've got all of them and now I can do all my courses.' She said, 'no, we still won't take you', and I was like, 'why?' She was like, 'it's a bit too late'. I was like, 'the courses hadn't even started so how are you telling me it's too late?' She said, 'no it's too late, you've got to start again, you've got to go to another school. Try and look for a new school. Go to the career's advice'. But when I went back to the school and they said to me no, and I saw people in the queue that got in late-September and they were allowed to get into the courses that I wanted, that rang the bell that okay, they just don't want me. I think that was classist to be honest. I don't know if it was racist, because I think it's just class division in the school. They just want to pick less students from* [working-class] *backgrounds*." – Maruan, Riverview

It seems that Maruan was entirely justified in feeling that that he was discriminated against by his secondary school, which seemingly wanted students with higher grade profiles, and fewer working-class students who may have been regarded as an ill-fit for the school's middle-class

institutional habitus. Whilst clearly a perceptive and determined young man, Maruan (and his family) lacked the cultural capital to successfully negotiate his access once he had met the sixth form's entry requirements. Mauran thus joined Riverview after this lengthy back and forth with his secondary school had left him both deflated, understanding that his school had rejected him on the basis of his class and possibly ethnicity, and with few to no other options.

A number of students enrolled at Riverview because it was their only option when it came to studying their chosen A-levels rather than continuing with their BTEC programmes – several students had previously been enrolled elsewhere, studying for a BTEC as they retook one of English or maths, hoping that they would be able to progress on to A-levels once they had secured their remaining GCSE, only to later be denied access to A-levels. Fawzia knew of the negative reputation of Riverview but, determined to pursue A-levels, applied nonetheless, knowing that she would likely be afforded a place:

"It's just considered as a bad college. It's just full of people who don't care about their life, and stuff like that. Everyone's just like, 'don't apply to Riverview'. But I'm like, I want to do my A-levels, so I'm going to do what I need to do, basically. So, I applied to Riverview, and the thing is, I know it's easy to get in. Everyone applies, you're going to get in. But I was stressing out. I knew I really want to get in, I want to do my A levels. No. And then, I came to apply, and they were like, 'yes, you can do your A levels'. The feeling, it's not that much of a big deal, but it was a good feeling, because you're like, wow, you're actually doing your A levels, and they're the A levels that you wanted to do." – Fawzia, Riverview

This quote demonstrates the complicated feelings that Fawzia had about Riverview: on the one hand, it is a stigmatised institution and it is "*easy to get in*", but, on the other, it provided her with the much-wanted opportunity to study for her chosen A-levels, these necessary for pursuing her career aspiration of pharmacy. It seemed that she wanted me to know that she understood Riverview was a recruiting institution and gaining a place was "*not that much of a big deal*", but still recognised being afforded the opportunity to take A-levels as a pivotal moment in her life.

The students who transferred into Riverview College having previously "failed" – that is, achieved grades below those allowing progression, or considered unsatisfactory by the student themselves – in either the first or second year of A-level elsewhere, might have had very little choice, with Riverview considered a "second chance" institution:

"*There was one friend who went from my secondary school to over here, and he told me that he went over here… And he said they teach everything, so I thought, I might as well try it, if they teach everything. So, when I came here, I just thought I wouldn't be accepted or enrolled, so – but then*

everything just went smooth. They said, 'yes, you can do that subject, you can do that subject, you can do that subject, okay, you're enrolled and start in September'. Everything was just really smooth, and my auntie – my cousin came to this sixth form, and so my auntie said, 'why would you go to Riverview? It's not a good sixth form. It's a – Why would you want to go there?' But I thought, if they're going to give me a chance and let me do what I want to do, then I'm going to just stay there. It's not like there's anywhere else." – Abdullah, Riverview

Having seriously underachieved in his first year at A-level, studying science subjects, Abdullah wanted to pursue humanities and social science subjects and, unlike other colleges that might have considered him, Riverview offered a full suite of A-level subjects. Despite "grapevine" knowledge of Riverview's negative reputation and his aunt seeking to dissuade him from attending Riverview, Abdullah understood that it probably represented his only option for him to sit his chosen A-level subjects as other colleges might not have given him "*a chance*".

Amy had visited several sixth form colleges whilst she was in year 11, including Riverview, eventually selecting a college in outer London, over 90 minutes from her home – a decision that she had come to recognise as unwise both because of the length and the cost of the commute. She describes how, having essentially given up on A-levels, in part because she did not think any college would accept her, Riverview's persistent marketing efforts paid off:

"*And you know how Riverview yeah, they just don't give up with their letters and their postcards and their emails. And they literally, I think there was like a postcard saying like like, 'congratulations for the new year' or something like a little leaflet of Riverview, and I was like 'oh my god, do you remember that one?' And then I applied and then I called up because it was getting late in the year, like I'd already got my place on the apprenticeship and everything, and it's getting late in the year when I called up and then they obviously said 'yeah it's getting a bit late, but if you come in for an interview, we can squeeze you in'.*" – Amy, Riverview

As a recruiting institution, Riverview had a tendency to "squeeze students in" long after the start of term: this will be discussed further later in the chapter.

St Bernard's

St Bernard's did not offer any Level 2 courses or offer sixth formers the opportunity to retake GCSE maths or English meaning that all students – A-level and BTEC – had to have achieved at least 5 "good" GCSEs including both maths and English Language as a prerequisite for admission. This was unusual for the local authority and for a school with St Bernard's GCSE achievement, and it meant that the school excluded a large proportion of its own year 11 cohort from progressing to its sixth form. At the same time, it also often lost its highest achievers (and,

by all accounts, more middle-class pupils) to more prestigious sixth form options outside of the borough. Entry on to most individual A-level programmes had some additional requirements, with GCSE B grades in specific subjects often required, and maths and further maths requiring at least a maths GCSE A grade.

The rationale behind St Bernard's entry requirements was explained to me by one of the heads of sixth form as a deliberate strategy: they had opted to "take the hit" on student numbers in pursuit of higher grades and the "right kinds of students" at Level 3. This, they hoped, would improve their league table position, thus, presumably, helping them to attract more of the "right kind" of students. The achievement of this would likely allow them to further increase their entry requirements in the future, possibly squeezing out some of the "less desirable" students who might have otherwise made it into the school's sixth form. I was struck by the matter-of-fact way this triumph of market-logic was explained to me, representing what Gewirtz (2002) describes as the "values drift" that can be encouraged by the demands of the market. Whilst St Bernard's was currently a recruiting sixth form, the school's management seemingly held ambitions for it to be a selective institution, even if that meant "selecting out" many of its own secondary students.

For the students who stayed on at St Bernard's for sixth form, some had seemingly given little thought to going elsewhere for A-levels. For many, this was simply because they deemed it "effort" – in London teen vernacular this denotes something being too strenuous and can be applied to almost anything that they do not wish to do, for whatever reason. However, others relayed more positive reasons, such as the familiarity of the school and staff. Some students had flirted with alternatives and had informed St Bernard's that they were leaving, only to fail to secure a place elsewhere as a result of, for example, missing deadlines – although, of course, it may be that it was the pull of the familiar rather than genuine disorganisation that meant that they stayed on. Others noted that their parents preferred or required them to stay on at St Bernard's, viewing it as a known quantity, and, therefore, "safe": Reay (2017) notes the significant anxiety that exists around school choice, and encouraging your child to transition to the sixth form of their existing school may be one way of avoiding this. This may be particularly true in the inner-city, where some schools are demonised (Reay, 2004b). Tara told me that whilst she had wanted to go to college, her mother had made her stay on at St Bernard's sixth form "because she doesn't want me getting pregnant": whilst Tara's tone suggested that this had been said with humour, college was obviously seen as representing something of a risk.

Like many St Bernard's students, Alistair considered the school sixth form the de facto choice and had not visited other sixth forms:

"*To be honest with you it just seemed, like, long. Here does my subjects so….?"* – Alistair, St Bernard's

Whilst Alistair had very good GCSE grades and would have been able to access any sixth form of his choosing, he did not see the potentially "*long*" (effortful) process as a worthwhile endeavour. Other students also emphasised convenience:

"*It's obviously near to my football club and that was my priority to be honest – no, not my priority, my education is my priority – but because I'm training two, three days a week*." – Paul, Riverview

Lejila had repeatedly told her tutor and head of year 11 that she would not be returning and recounted confidently asserting in the final "chapel" of year 11 that she would never set foot there again. However, this was possibly bravado:

"I had thought I'd go and look at a few sixth forms, but when it came down to it, I don't know… Not that I couldn't be bothered, but I thought 'actually, it's not always the best, but I do know it here, it's near my house, I know what it's like'. And it was just much easier. A few of my [older] *sister's friends, they went college and they all did really badly. Like, really badly. So, my sister, she was also kind of like, you should just stay."* – Lejila, St Bernard's

Chelsea had considered an alternative sixth form but chose to stay on at St Bernard's because of the influence of her peers:

"*Oh my god, I couldn't wait to get out of here! But Natalie, Lejila – all them lot were staying, and I thought 'sixth form will be better, no uniform, no PE!' so, yeah... Big mistake.*" – Chelsea, St Bernard's

Students can be seen to stay on at St Bernard's because of the "pull" of what is easy or what is known, and this can exert itself even when students intended to leave. Very few external students apparently feel a pull to *transfer* to this moderately attaining school sixth form. The small number of students who joined St Bernard's for sixth form did so from a couple of "feeder" schools without their own sixth forms in a neighbouring borough and from one school with a sixth form with very high entry requirements. They were effectively *pushed* from their schools:

"*I would've stayed on if I could've and it was a bit sad actually 'cos I really liked my tutor. We basically had an assembly and it was Mr Andrews and someone from a college and someone else I think, I can't remember. But my Head of Year, he said, if you want to do A-levels you should go to Alexander Grove School or St Bernard's and here is on my dad's way to work so that's why I came here – so I wouldn't have to get the bus."* – Simarjit, St Bernard's

For Simarjit and other transfer students, St Bernard's represented a convenient alternative that their schools encouraged them towards, apparently at least partly based on the fairly random factor of personal relationships between senior staff in the different schools – Mr Andrews told me that the schools he tended to be invited to deliver assemblies in were ones where he personally knew key staff members.

St Bernard's was left with many vacant spaces the academic year I completed my fieldwork. The sixth form leadership continued trying to fill these well into September but, due to their relatively high entry requirements, were unable to do so, with many fewer "late arrivals" than Riverview.

Part I conclusion

As outlined, there is a gulf between the idealised process by which students choose their sixth form and the process by which many students take up their places at Riverview and St Bernard's, both of which, for many, represented a "negative choice". This is in part due to a "market" in which some "producers" choose their "customers", rather than the other way round (Ball, 1993). In the context of a competitive post-16 market, recruiting institutions may well secure their cohorts late, as was the case for both Riverview and St Bernard's.

Young people's post-16 decisions ought not to be considered free and untethered choices: students' GCSE achievement – even if "good", achieving the GCSE benchmark – places limits on where they are able to attend to study A-levels in the increasingly selective post-16 sector. As noted by Maguire et al. (2000) in their study of post-school transitions, young people "bring with them a baggage of previous experiences and are positioned differently in the 'economy of student worth'" (pp. 11- 12). Further, students' habitus and level of cultural capital (i.e., the likelihood of their being what Ball and Vincent describe as "skilled choosers") is also likely to influence "choice" of institutions and, indeed, subjects.

It is clear that very few students at either institution had been able (or, in some cases, wanted) to operate as "skilled choosers" – using all of the publicly available information, along with information available from their social networks, in order to make a "rational choice" as to where to complete their A-levels. At Riverview, students often enrol due to lack of alternative options, whereas at St Bernard's, students may not even consider their alternative options. This may have repercussions for students' engagement and achievement at A-level.

Part II: A-level subject choices

At the time of my research, most students chose four subjects to study at A-level, generally dropping one after the first year. When I carried out my fieldwork, St Bernard's (theoretically) offered students a choice of 18 A-level subjects and Riverview offered a choice of 17 subjects, with more national curriculum subjects offered at St Bernard's.

It has long been recognised that not all school subjects are accorded the same value (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This can be seen in both general discourse – Constantinou (2019) suggests that subjects have strong and weak "brands" which serve to perpetuate the curriculum hierarchy – and in policy. Whilst maths and English have long been prioritised in education, this subject hierarchy can be seen to have been formalised through the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a performance indicator introduced in 2010, which measures the achievement of pupils who have gained a GCSE in English, mathematics, the sciences, history or geography, and a language. The government stated that the primary purpose of the EBacc was to "increase the take-up of 'core' academic qualifications that best equipped a pupil for progression to further study and work" (Long and Danechi, 2019). The EBacc both emphasised the importance of the included subjects, and incentivised schools to prioritise these subjects. In 2011, The Russell Group published a list of A-level "facilitating subjects" – biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, further mathematics, geography, history, English literature and classical or modern languages – which they suggested were good preparation for university and, generally, preferred by their members (Russell Group, 2011). In 2016, a "Facilitating subjects" column was added to 16-18 league tables, showing the percentage of students achieving AAB at A-level, including two "facilitating" subjects. Whilst the Russell Group abandoned this list in 2019, the accountability measure remains. Again, this can be seen to signal the superiority of these traditional subjects and may influence the IAG provided to high achievers as it is advantageous for the institution for high grades to be achieved in these specific subjects[5].

Institutions matter for students' choices as they both set out what options are available for students and offer IAG. Research has found inequalities in the options available to students. Abrahams (2018) found extensive differences in the subject options available to young people at different schools, with those students attending the "disadvantaged" school in her sample being the most constrained in their choices. Option blocks appear to be a perennial issue (Ball,

[5] Fieldwork at St Bernard's took place before this accountability measure was added to 16-18 league tables, but this may have informed IAG for students at Riverview.

1981; Abrahams, 2018; Barrance and Ellwood, 2018). Because they limit student choices, they may result in students having to take "undesired" courses (Abrahams, 2018). At both Riverview and St Bernard's, choices were configured and constrained by subjects' arrangement in the option blocks, as has been the case in every sixth form in which I have worked (all of which have been inner-city and state funded). Dilnot (2016) found large differences in subject choice between school types, with students attending sixth form colleges much less likely to take at least two facilitating A-levels than students attending non-selective school sixth forms, despite similar average GCSE attainment. This may be explained by differences in subject offerings but may also reflect socioeconomic differences, with students at college on average less privileged than those attending school sixth forms (ibid). Abrahams suggests that careers advisors may engage in what she terms "institutional concerted cultivation" (2018: 1145), helping pupils from middle-class backgrounds to further their advantages through aiding them in making the "right" choices for A-level. Such concerted cultivation of students' choices was not evident at Riverview or St Bernard's.

As might be expected, differences can be found in students' A-level subject choices in terms of social class, gender, and ethnicity (Vidal-Rodeiro, 2007). Social class appeared to impact students' choices with students often choosing subjects "that corresponded closely to their parents' position in the economic and cultural hierarchy" (ibid: 6). There is a clear socioeconomic gap in terms of take-up of facilitating subjects: Dilnot (2016) found that those in the top socioeconomic quintile were 14.9 percentage points more likely than those in the bottom quintile to take at least two facilitating subjects. Whilst there may have been a blurring of the traditional gender dichotomy in terms of subject preferences (Francis et al., 2003), the most recent data from Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) demonstrates that A-level subject choices remain gendered. Whilst most of the subjects within the ten most popular A-level subjects for girls and boys are shared, there is a noticeable greater preference for STEM subjects amongst boys and a greater preference for the arts and social sciences amongst girls – whilst physics, economics, and computer science appear in boys' but not girls' top ten, English literature, art and design subjects, and sociology appear in girls' but not boys' (JCQ, 2021). This greater preference for STEM means that more male students take at least two facilitating subjects (Dilnot, 2016). These gender divisions were apparent at both St Bernard's and Riverview, with particularly marked divisions in the take-up of physics and English. Such divisions are likely influenced by gender ideology (van der Vleuten et al., 2016), which also influences other pertinent factors impacting upon choice such as young people's occupational aspirations (Francis et al., 2003). Ethnicity appears to have some influence on students' subject choices, with minority ethnic pupils slightly more likely to choose science subjects (Shaw et al.,

2016; McMaster, 2017), and more likely to be taking at least two facilitating subjects (Dilnot, 2016). These class, gender, and ethnic differences in A-level choices matter as they may indicate that students' "choices" are structured by the secondary effects of stratification (Boudon, 1974), and as subject choices have a significant impact on the type of higher education institution attended (Dilnot, 2018; Vidal-Rodeiro, 2019), thus potentially contributing to inequalities.

According to rational choice and market-based logic, ideally, students should choose their A-level subjects based on academic interests, aptitude, and subjects' usefulness to them, including in relation to their plans for the future, with certain vocational degrees (generally those leading to a professional qualification) necessitating particular A-level subjects. They should have considered their strengths and interests, engaged in research around the subjects, and, hopefully, discussed their choices with education professionals including teaching staff and possibly careers specialists. A-level subject choices obviously matter in terms of students' engagement and achievement at A-level.

As outlined, students at St Bernard's and Riverview were not, on the whole, "skilled choosers" in terms of institutions; they largely ended up at their respective sixth forms by default or through an absence of alternative options. Similar processes can be seen in relation to many students' A-level subject choices. Students should choose a provider based, at least in part, on the curriculum offer. However, this is not necessarily the case, and this makes "irrational" subject choices more likely, particularly when the student is a late enroller. That many students (particularly Riverview students) prioritise qualification *type* over subject demonstrates the continued lack of parity of esteem between A-levels and vocational courses – on the whole, it seems that relatively few students opt to take BTEC when they could access A-levels. Several students told me that they significantly adjusted their subject choices based on what was available to them at their "chosen" institution. Many students involved in my research felt that they had made poor subject choices. Others lamented that they had been ill-prepared or that they had misunderstood what chosen subjects entailed. The process by which students choose their A-level subjects is therefore of interest. At my research sites, institutional influences on subject choices included individual subject entry requirements, the presentation of subjects, and student-teacher interactions at points of choice making.

Whilst at Riverview most A-level subjects were available to students who met the general entry requirements, at St Bernard's, as is very common, most individual A-level subjects had specific entry requirements, and, generally at the behest of the subject teacher, these were higher for some subjects than others, with traditional, "facilitating" subjects often requiring higher GCSE grades. These grade requirements were based on perceptions about the difficulty of particular subjects and the prior level a student would need to have attained in order to be "successful".

This also conveyed messages to students about the relative difficulty and the value and prestige of different subjects. Further, differentiated entry requirements led to different cohort profiles between subjects. The combination of these various factors contributed to the "brand" of subjects. St Bernard's ambition for students to access Russell Group universities (this, seemingly, a particular concern of the headteacher) meant that students with stronger GCSE profiles tended to be encouraged to study "facilitating" subjects, with those with lower grades required or encouraged to consider subjects including sociology, psychology, and media studies. It would be unfair to say that these subjects were not taken seriously – both heads of sixth form taught "new" subjects, and they were among the most widely taken A-levels, meaning that students' success in them was crucial to the school's results and league table position. However, common sense assumptions about their relative easiness, or even more "vocational" nature, were apparent. Students' awareness that these were the "easy" subjects, or feeling that they had been pushed into them, may have influenced attitudes towards learning in subjects such as sociology, which is popular but "peripheral" (Cant et al., 2020).

Along with differentiated entry requirements, the way in which subjects were presented to students may also have influenced subject choices, particularly for non-national curriculum subjects (such as sociology, psychology, and media studies), which would be new and unfamiliar to students. At open evenings, teaching staff are instructed by senior leadership to promote their subject via some kind of demonstration or interactive task. Amusingly, at both St Bernard's and Riverview's open evenings, biology teachers presented students with the exciting and rare opportunity to handle a sheep's lung, the biology teacher demonstrating lung inflation. At St Bernard's open evening, the psychology teacher had set up a table with a display of a 3D model of a brain, a series of Rorschach test inkblot cards, and a Stroop test.

Whilst certainly an anatomical brain is of significance to A-level psychology, the psychology teacher confided in me her concern that the subject "demonstration" wasn't necessarily providing prospective students with a realistic impression of the subject. She explained that experience taught her that she would be telling a good number of students that evening that psychology is not about mind reading, but "it's not really all this either. Psychology's hard!" She noted the tension between wanting to provide students with a realistic impression of the subject and not discouraging them: "I don't want to put them all off by saying 'Yes, you have to learn about 40 studies in great detail, and to do well you have to be good at science, essay writing, and maths' otherwise I'll have no kids."

Research demonstrates that funding cuts since 2012 have reduced subject offerings at an institutional level, with financially struggling schools and sixth forms no longer able to afford to maintain courses with small classes (Robinson and Bunting, 2021). The failure to recruit enough

A-level students can lead to a subject being cancelled and teacher redeployment to a different Key Stage or non-specialism, or even redundancies. The pressure for teachers to actively "recruit" may well have consequences for students' A-level choices – and this may be particularly true for those students with less cultural capital who may well be more swayed by a teacher's "pitch". When institutions – and, indeed, to some extent, teachers within these institutions – are competing for students, there can be perverse incentives to misrepresent the nature of A-level subjects, potentially presenting them as "fun" rather than academic. This can be seen in these students' complaints about their selection of humanities/social science A-level subjects:

"*I knew that they would be very hard, but I didn't know that it would be so much writing based, if that makes sense. I thought there would be more debate*." – Habiba, Riverview

"The teachers made the subjects sound a lot more interesting and fun than what they are." – Simarjit, St Bernard's

As described earlier, students generally attend an enrolment event or interview appointment at which, depending on whether it takes place prior to or after the student receives their GCSE results, they indicate their choice of or select their A-level subjects. It became apparent to me that these student-teacher interactions could be highly influential on – even crucial to – students' choice of A-level subjects. Quite frequently, teachers showed little engagement with or interest in the students' choices. However, depending on the circumstances, teachers could also be found to actively recruit for a subject (generally those that were currently undersubscribed), or to steer students away from their own or another subject based on their impression of the student or the student's expected or achieved results, or because they knew that the subject was "full" but there was pressure to enrol.

The following ethnographic vignette is from a fairly typical April after-school enrolment event at Riverview. Whilst in Autumn term students usually needed to book to attend an open or admissions event, by this point in the Spring term these were "walk-in" and sometimes very sparsely attended. The vignette demonstrates that students may choose their A-level subjects with very little thought or support and may be steered towards certain subjects.

Unlike several of the academies I have worked in since, Riverview was purpose built as a college, and I imagine that, once, the large canteen might have been the jewel in the crown of this new, modern facility. However, its shine had faded, and, even when cleared for enrolment events – the dining tables and chairs upturned and pushed to the side, and tables dressed with bright, college-logo-emblazoned tablecloths arranged in the centre – it was a tired space and perpetually smelt of hot fat and bleach.

Three teachers from different departments sat in the canteen, and I set up with my laptop closest to Alan, a White, middle-aged humanities teacher. He greeted me with a sardonic grin and gestured exaggeratedly at the empty canteen – I took this to indicate his displeasure at having to stay late under such circumstances.

Not long after, two Black girls dressed in a near uniform of tracksuit bottoms, crop tops, and large gold hoop earrings arrived in the canteen. One of the girls approached Alan and sat down, somewhat cautiously, it seemed to me, opposite him.

Smiling and moving his marking to one side, Alan asked, "So, what can I do for you?". In a tone suggesting that this ought to be obvious, the student replied, "I'm here to enrol?"

Alan asked what courses she wanted to study.

"Ummm. I'm not too sure actually. What courses do you do?"

With a slightly ironic smile, possibly suggestive of the regularity of this scenario of a student seeking to enrol without prior knowledge of the subjects offered, Alan slid the student the Riverview prospectus and a paper copy of the A-level option blocks, explaining that she should pick one subject from each block. The girl thumbed through the prospectus staring down intently for about a minute before quickly raising her head: "English? And then psychology? Yeah, I'd like to do psychology."

Alan nodded slowly: "So, you like writing? Because there's lots of essay writing for these subjects."

This seemed to disconcert the young woman – "Oh, reeeeally?" – and she returned to the prospectus before selecting media studies, noting that her cousin had taken media studies and had made a film. Alan reminded her that she needed, at least, a third subject: "How about sociology?", he offered. She considered for a moment and nodded her consent.

Alan smiled approvingly and drummed a rhythm on the table with his fingers: "Yep, that sounds like a really good combination, and then you get to do a bit of coursework, not just exam, and there's a bit of overlap. Okey doke then, if I could get you to just fill in the details here – sorry, I didn't even ask your name! – and then I'll run through the rest of the paperwork with you."

In total, this entire exchange lasted probably four minutes. A teenager arrived at the college unsure what courses the college offered or what courses she might want to study, and then "signed up" to a range of A-level courses in a matter of minutes with little advice, guidance, or thought. The "interviewing" teacher subtly steered the student away from her first suggested combination of subjects – perhaps on the basis of some level of prejudice. At least one subject,

media studies, was potentially chosen on the basis of quite vague, second-hand information, and one, sociology, was accepted at the teacher's suggestion, despite the student not necessarily knowing anything about the subject – which, incidentally, also involves lots of essay writing.

This was not how teachers approached all student "interviews", and it is reasonable to assume that the timing and the teacher's moderate displeasure at staying late for a poorly attended event influenced this exchange. A range of variables affect the nature of a prospective student's interview and the extent and quality of IAG provided. These include who interviews them, the presence of a Head of Department, and then, seemingly, the teacher's mood and the time of the interview. Whether students receive high quality IAG may, thus, be in part down to luck – although it would be naïve to suggest that teachers' judgements and students' social class and ethnicity do not play some role.

Generally, teachers do ask at least some questions to assess the student's prior experience of the subject, their understanding of the discipline, and whether they are likely to have the appropriate skills – and this is particularly likely when teachers are interviewing students who wish to take the subject they teach. It is important to note that student habitus and cultural capital come to bear on these exchanges: a young person being able to discuss their academic interests and strengths may be a product of concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011) and is likely to prove more difficult for working-class students who may also lack confidence in their dealings with institutions (ibid). The language that students use and the responses that they provide may be important for how an admissions or enrolment interview unfolds. Where a student uses language deemed inappropriate for the context – I once saw a Black male interviewee scolded for calling the (White, male) interviewing teacher "fam" – or provides what are deemed to be inappropriate responses, demonstrating a lack of understanding of or interest in the subject, the teacher may seek to influence subject choices through the kinds of warning used by Alan. I frequently heard teachers make claims along the lines of students demonstrating a "can't be bothered" attitude, and I did wonder the extent to which this interpretation was based on the largely working-class and minority ethnic young people's embodiment or identity markers.

Whilst certainly the hasty and unsupported fashion in which this young woman chose her A-level courses is not how all students select their A-level courses, it was also not unusual: I observed many such exchanges, and this hurried and arbitrary choice-making corresponds with many students' experiences captured in my interview data.

Interviewees' choices

Several of my interviewees (Alistair, Ibrahim, Lejila, Paul, and Tara) described having carefully chosen their subjects based on their academic interests and strengths. However, it was more common for students to have chosen in a fairly arbitrary or ill-advised fashion. A number of my interviewees expressed having given relatively little thought to their subject choices or outlined how their particular circumstances meant they had not been afforded very much choice.

At the first sixth form she attended, Jamila had followed her peers:

"*So initially, I done, I just chose – basically, it's quite stupid. But everyone in my old school* [an Islamic girls' school] *was all into science. So, I was like, everyone else is doing the most – conventionally, everyone just done maths, biology, chemistry, so I was like maths, biology, chemistry you have to do that.... Then I chose English actually, started for English, but I just didn't like the way the course is going. So, I was like, let me do something that doesn't require as much reading because I wasn't really a reading kind of person. And I stumbled on to politics for some reason and then I actually enjoyed it, it was one of those like, by luck, like subjects."* – Jamila, Riverview

We can see here both default "choices" and a serendipitous choice, but very little careful consideration. Jamila's subject selection had led to mixed success, and, at the end of two years, significantly lower A-level grades than would have been predicted from her very strong GCSE achievement, necessitating her retaking year 13 at Riverview.

Samilaah had also been led by others, in her case, her family:

"*So, my AS choices, I think, I wasn't too sure what I was doing, to be honest because I still didn't know what I wanted to do in the future. So, my sister and my parents chose the subjects for me because I felt like they knew me better than I knew me at the time. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so they picked biology, chemistry, psychology and sociology, those four.*" – Samilaah, Riverview

Whilst Samilaah enjoyed and continued with sociology, she had struggled with her science subjects and retook year 12 after achieving three U grades (and a C in sociology), demonstrating that science options were not the best pathway for this student.

In the first sixth form he attended, Abdullah had also followed a science route and had chosen his entire suite of A-levels on the basis of their perceived legitimacy, despite this not being where either his interest or skills lay:

"When I first did my AS Levels, I took on hard courses, because I just thought they were the most valuable. And I was just struggling to understand everything, and I realised there were so many holes in my knowledge." – Abdullah, Riverview

With A-levels representing a significant "step up" for even well-prepared students, Abdullah's choice of science subjects had contributed to him finishing his first year with three E grades and a U grade. This had both necessitated his move to Riverview and seriously dented this shy, nervous young man's confidence and self-esteem. He seemed to carry a profound sense of shame about what he saw as his educational failure and worried deeply about his teachers thinking he was unintelligent.

Some students' science subject selection may well have been influenced by what education commentator Laura McInerney (2019) describes as the "misguided obsession with STEM subjects", which she traces back to a speech by Nicky Morgan, then education secretary, in 2014, in which she claimed that "the subjects that keep young people's options open and unlock doors to all sorts of careers are the STEM subjects" (Morgan, 2014). This focus, along with policies such as the introduction of the EBacc and the Russell Group's facilitating subjects list, may have encouraged shifting A-level choices away from the humanities. It should also be noted that STEM uptake is higher amongst minority ethnic students (McMaster, 2017). An alternative and, in the context of my study, perhaps more pertinent way of looking at this is that humanities and arts subjects have *less diverse* take up. This may be explained by "relative risk aversion" (ibid), with minority ethnic students aware of the additional barriers that they are likely to face within the labour market. This may mean that minority ethnic students are more likely to pursue STEM subjects even where other pathways would be more suitable.

Maruan joined Riverview late following a lengthy back and forth with his secondary school that resulted in him before finally being denied a sixth form place there. This meant that he had relatively little choice when it came to choosing his A-level subjects:

"I'm not going to lie. When I came here, everyone had started already. So, everyone picked the courses that I wanted. I wanted Economics and Business. But they were too full, so I wasn't allowed. So, I just did Maths, Politics, Film Studies and Media. The only reason I did Film Studies and Media is because I knew Maths was already going to be hard." – Maruan, Riverview

Whilst this does demonstrate a student making strategic choices, it also meant that two of his A-level subjects were selected as second choice subjects from the options that were left and picked according to an assessment of their relative easiness rather than based on knowledge of or interest in the subjects.

I encountered many students who had made largely *negative* choices about their subjects: choosing their A-levels not based on a positive interest in or aptitude for the subject but, rather, seeking to avoid particular subjects, including those that they felt that they had lacked interest in or aptitude for at GCSE. For example, Chelsea had deliberately chosen a suite of new subjects – those not offered at GCSE – based on not having particularly enjoyed her GCSE subjects and wanting new teachers. This decision was made partly on the basis that she felt that she had acquired a negative reputation with those teachers who had taught her in years 10 and 11. This demonstrates the interaction between Chelsea's decision to stay on at St Bernard's and her choice of subjects. Similarly, Simarjit described her choices as being based on having found boring the national curriculum subjects that she had studied previously and hoping that sociology, psychology, and philosophy would offer greater excitement and relevance to her life:

"*Really, I found everything quite uninteresting at high school. I thought, like, when am I ever going to use this – basically, it's not going to help me in my life, it's boring – so I chose all new subjects.*" – Simarjit, St Bernard's

Fahim (St Bernard's), a reasonably high-attaining "all-rounder" at GCSE had a mix of motivations for his choices, including "opportunities" and complementarity, but chose two of his subjects on the basis of little knowledge or understanding of what the subjects entailed:

Fahim: *And I was thinking well my thinking process was doing sociology that's one window of opportunity and then maths is a bigger one and then Physics like sort of comes with the maths and economics goes with maths and sociology as well so social science. So, you know they all sort of fell together and…*

NL: *Did you know much about them when you chose them?*

Fahim: *Economics, no. Maths, of course. Physics, well not to the A-Level standard. Sociology, no. But both my Aunties did sociology. My youngest Auntie scored full marks she just thought it was bang easy. Just do it.*

As in the earlier ethnographic vignette, many students selected at least one subject at the suggestion of the teacher who interviewed them. This was often what students viewed as an "additional" fourth subject in order to provide a full timetable, as was mandated by many sixth forms. This tended to be a subject that had not previously been studied, treated as something of a "wild card". Regina had only been able to choose two subjects for herself and selected her third and fourth subjects based on the suggestions of the teacher who had interviewed her, with classical civilisation as her fourth subject:

"*It was something new, something that I've never known about before so I thought I'll just try."* – Regina, Riverview

Whilst Regina reasonably enjoyed the subject, she was finding it very difficult, and "*didn't understand anything*" of Aristophanes. As a fairly diligent student (at least in terms of her intentions), this meant that she was needing to dedicate more time to this subject than to her favoured A-levels in order not to fail.

Amy's fourth subject was chosen to provide the "respectability" of a traditional A-level subject, despite having not enjoyed the subject at GCSE:

"I only picked English Literature because I thought I needed – because I did like sociology, politics, history, I thought like English was like a solid like you know your English, maths. Yeah, it was like a traditional A-level. That's the only reason I picked it because my mum wanted me to do something that was solid because she thought that sociology was just fun." – Amy, Riverview

Whilst this was essentially chosen as an "extra" subject, she attributed her gradual complete disengagement with her first college to the difficulty and boringness of English. This had undermined her confidence in her academic abilities and encouraged her to focus her time and energy on her paid work, which she felt she was good at and for which she was rewarded in a more immediate way. This demonstrates that although a poor choice of a student's fourth subject may seem relatively innocuous, it can have a disproportionately damaging effect on students' overall engagement and achievement.

Part II conclusion

In the previous section, I discussed how not all young people have the same capacity or inclination for "choice" of post-16 institution – not all young people are acting strategically, and choice is likely to be influenced by capitals and habitus – and we see similar processes at work in relation to subject choices.

For a great many of the students involved in my research – students who had underperformed or were predicted to underperform – A-level choices appear somewhat haphazard and arbitrary, with very few seeming to be based on genuine interest or a reasonable, measured evaluation of their academic strengths. Although some chose their subjects on the basis of a particular career path, again, this often was not very well thought through and was potentially unrealistic – for example, medicine for a student with average grades and no demonstrable proficiency for sciences. What we likely see here is the intersection of students' limited cultural

capital and institutional pressures, with students' (inappropriate) A-level subject choices then having consequences for their engagement and achievement.

Part III: the early days of sixth form

The transition to post-16 education is an important one and, like all transitions, may involve both opportunities (Zittoun, 2016) and, potentially, difficulties, as young people face a new environment, new expectations, and changes in relationships with peers and teachers (Sancho and Cline, 2012). Young people have a need to "belong" (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and this sense of belonging is very important for successful educational transitions (Sancho and Cline, 2012). Literature relating to both the secondary school and the university transition (Evangelou et al., 2008; Briggs et al., 2012) emphasise the importance of the early phase of transition for setting the right culture for learning.

As noted previously, both Riverview and St Bernard's were recruiting institutions which secured their cohorts late. There are a number of disadvantages that arise from an institution securing its cohort late. Firstly, it means that the summer term transition events that typically take place at selective sixth forms are less likely. Secondly, an institution securing its cohort late means that leaders may not know what courses they can offer, which may result in last-minute changes, as will be described later in the chapter. It also makes unsuitable course choices more likely as students may not be able to choose from the full range of subjects and, indeed, may be encouraged to pick undersubscribed subjects so that these remain viable. Thirdly, as the struggle for what teachers often characterise critically as "bums on seats" intensifies, students are less and less likely to feel that a place at the sixth form is an achievement and this may diminish the worth the institution is accorded – this is demonstrated in my interview data. Finally, institutions securing their cohort late creates a large amount of administrative work for the early months of term, delaying requests for and the delivery of students' Common Transfer Files, where these exist. Teaching and pastoral staff often receive important information from secondary schools very late, if at all, with possible implications for teaching and learning, and pastoral support for vulnerable students and those with special educational needs.

On the surface, the start of the new school years at Riverview and St Bernard's were very different, with the school sixth form of St Bernard's seemingly providing a much more orderly and organised transition experience compared to the somewhat chaotic term start at the large sixth form college. However, whilst St Bernard's presented a more well-ordered year start on the surface, behind the scenes, there were issues, including the last-minute withdrawal of A-

level courses. This part of the chapter will seek to provide insight into the student experience during the early days of sixth form at both institutions.

Induction activities

At both institutions, the first week of term was billed as an "induction" period, with shorter days and a mix of tutor time and timetabled lessons – for each of these recruiting institutions there was a recognition that their cohort was not necessarily settled, leading to a slightly slow start. On the first full day at St Bernard's, the new year 12s and tutors attended an assembly in the school hall with the two heads of sixth form, Mr Andrews and Mrs Lovell. The following ethnographic vignette describes the welcome assembly at St Bernard's.

Two teachers stood on either side of the external double doors check for dress code infractions, shushing students as they entered the block. In the hall, the students sat arranged in rows facing the front, with an aisle between them. Neatly-dressed teachers stood at spaced intervals on either side of the hall, facing the front but with their bodies angled at 45 degrees, using their vantage point to scan the rows of students for undesirable behaviour. Most students were quiet and facing the front, but audible whispers and occasional barely-suppressed shrieks could be heard from the front rows. Mr Andrews and Mrs Lovell, the two heads of sixth form, stood at the front of the hall against a backdrop of a screen with a slide of the St Bernard's crest and their names and titles. The pair, whom I'd previously only seen being relaxed and informal, seemed to be standing to attention, unsmiling, and looking straight ahead. When the last form group entered the hall, Mr Andrews nodded at a teacher towards the back of the hall who pulled the double doors closed, and several teachers gently *shushed* to achieve silence in the hall.

Mr Andrews greeted the students: "Good morning, sixth formers, and welcome to St Bernard's Sixth Form." He reintroduced himself and Mrs Lovell and congratulated students for being there and for beginning their "sixth form journey" at St Bernard's.

Mrs Lovell briefly ran through what she described as "housekeeping" – including a slide with photos of key staff members and their specific responsibilities, and where to find them, the sixth form dress code, and arrangements for the rest of the week as standard timetables were not yet operational – before Mr Andrews took over, beginning what he'd light-heartedly described to me earlier in the sixth form office as his "spiel", suggesting that it had been well rehearsed over his years as the head of sixth form.

He noted that sixth form "is probably the hardest you'll ever have to work" before reminding students that they were also role models to the lower school: "That is so important, so we

expect maturity and professionalism from our sixth formers at all times – what does maturity and professionalism look like?"

Mr Andrews went on to describe how "maturity and professionalism" meant punctuality, wearing business attire – and reiterated that this meant proper shoes, not black trainers – moving sensibly around the school, being ready to work in every lesson, and completing homework on time and to a high standard.

"That's what we expect every day and-"

Part way through this speech on expectations, apparently prompted by some student whispering, Mr Andrews roared "AND THIS IS NOT THE BEHAVIOUR I EXPECT TO SEE FROM SIXTH FORMERS, LET ALONE IN THE FIRST ASSEMBLY OF THE YEAR!" Silence fell over the hall before being broken by a muted giggle from somewhere near the front. In a tone communicating more disappointed disgust than anger, Mr Andrews instructed the immediately identified offender to "Get out and wait outside my office." This seemed so at odds with the laid back and jovial impression I had of Mr Andrews, and with what I would come to see as the relaxed way he engaged with his sixth formers that I was quite shocked by it, and later came to wonder if this was a set piece to demonstrate his seriousness and assert his authority at the outset, reminiscent of the performative "no smiles until Christmas" approach taken by some classroom teachers.

A smartly dressed Black girl got out her seat and manoeuvred her way down the row whilst her classmates looked at their feet, one boy with his hand placed over his mouth, evidently suppressing laughter himself. Mr Andrews remained silent, staring straight ahead until she had exited the hall and the doors had closed behind her. Regaining his composure, he continued:

"Now I don't enjoy having to raise my voice, particularly with sixth formers who ought to be mature young adults, and not still be behaving like the children in the lower school."

The assembly continued in this vein, emphasising expectations of student conduct, before moving on to discuss the academic and extracurricular expectations of students and the "promise" of sixth form.

Having signalled to a teacher at the back of the hall that he was drawing to a close and to open the hall doors, Mr Andrews concluded the 25-minute assembly with a message designed to inspire: "Sixth form is your chance to shape your future. We give you far more freedom, and we want you to use that wisely: sixth form comes with a lot of responsibility. I want each of you to be thinking about what it is that you really want to do: we want you to dream big and we will work with you to make that dream a reality. Thank you, year 12."

Assemblies can be understood as a ritual designed to shape students in particular ways (Silbert and Jacklin, 2015), and St Bernard's emphasises professionalism, hard work, personal responsibility, and ambition. These seemed to me to be the core values St Bernard's wanted its students to embody, and "professionalism" particularly was emphasised in many assemblies and in student-teacher interactions around dress-code and behaviour. I found this curious as "professionalism" did not seem like an obviously academic concern but, rather, seemed to be about "employability" and, perhaps more importantly, appearances. I later learnt that the young woman who was sent out – judged to have failed to demonstrate the mandatory "professionalism" – was a continuing St Bernard's student who, I was told by Mr Andrews, had "scraped in" to study BTEC Business in the sixth form. When I got to know her later, she described herself to me as a student who was known for being a "loudmouth", and she felt that she had been deliberately targeted in the assembly. There was also an effort to discursively draw a boundary between the sixth formers and the lower school pupils, despite the fact that, at least within this assembly, sixth formers were still being treated in an identical fashion to the younger pupils. This did not go unnoticed by students and, leaving the hall, I heard a girl complain to her friends, "I thought sixth form was meant to be different".

At St Bernard's, the successful sixth former is constructed as an "all-rounder" who engages fully with the life of the school. The arguably greater emphasis on "professionalism" over academic engagement was a theme that continued and contributed to the view expressed by some interviewees that "the school" cared more about things like uniform than they did about learning. Whilst I do not believe that this was actually true, sixth formers' attire certainly was a key focus of the sixth form team, and teachers expended a lot of energy on monitoring students and enforcing the dress code – possibly because this is far easier to manage than students' engagement and achievement. The effect that this had on teacher-student relationships (and, possibly, engagement more broadly) will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The start of term felt disorderly at Riverview, where the vast majority of year 12 students were new to the college. Riverview is large, spread across four floors in two adjoined blocks, with poor signage – signs had been printed to aid students' navigation around the college, but, by day two, many of these were ripped or had been removed – and this led to chaotic corridors, lost students, and missed sessions. Riverview lacked a suitable space large enough to assemble the whole year 12 cohort, and the member of the senior management team who was apparently normally responsible for student induction was on maternity leave. This meant that the induction period had been planned hurriedly, with plans communicated to staff during a briefing each morning and prone to change. Delivery of almost all induction information and activities was delegated to form tutors (some of them new staff members themselves), who

delivered this information with, apparently, variable levels of enthusiasm and adherence to the instructions provided by senior tutors. Whilst usually the college held a "Freshers' Fair" during the induction period, it seemed that this had been forgotten, and was eventually organised for November. The poor planning, disorganisation, and weak staff buy-in of the induction period at Riverview set the tone academic for the year, and students were not oblivious to this.

In informal conversations and interviews, students at Riverview were fairly disparaging about their induction period at the sixth form college:

"*I don't think anyone knew what was meant to be happening. On day one we had two hours with our tutor in one of the top floor labs. The windows wouldn't open and he said that the air-con was broken but I think that he just didn't know how it worked. And then we did one of those – what's it called again? An icebreaker type thing. We made paper planes I think. And after he showed us like the ultimate way to make a paper plane – do you know it? But yeah, that was pretty much it to be honest. I thought we were starting lessons in the afternoon but then I think they just cancelled them, I'm not sure why. Yeah, the first week here, I thought 'wow; this is very different from Parkholme'* [previous sixth form attended]." – Hamza, Riverview

"*Yeah, it was actually quite mad to be honest. And boring. Lots of not knowing where I was meant to be going. Twice I got to the room and there was no one there. And thingy, my tutor, they was honestly like so bored. He ran through a Powerpoint and then we pretty much just chatted, and was on our phones."* – Amy, Riverview

The significant concern over student numbers at Riverview meant that these were reported to staff in daily emails from the college marketing assistant, along with pleas to continue telling students to encourage friends at other institutions or currently without a sixth form place to join. These daily emails reported fluctuating student numbers – a significant number of A-level students "dropped out" within the first two weeks, these likely students with higher GCSE profiles for whom other options were available.

Whilst the induction period could operate to help to ensure that students feel that they belong within the sixth form and to ensure that they understand what will be required of them academically to succeed, students reported that the emphasis at St Bernard's appeared to be on rules and appearances, whilst Riverview's induction period left many students with a rather negative impression of the college.

Churn and changes

At both St Bernard's and Riverview there was considerable student "churn" in the first few weeks of term: students leaving for or joining from other institutions, and student movement between subjects. As both sixth forms are "recruiting" institutions, they continued to accept new students after the start of term. The four late arrivals at St Bernard's were made up of two previous St Bernard's students who returned to the school having disliked the college environment that they had transferred to, and two recent arrivals to the UK who needed sixth form places. These were regarded as legitimate reasons for late enrolment. Riverview was rather less discerning and, much to the irritation of many teachers, continued to accept any student who met (or, indeed, nearly met) the minimum entry requirements up until the October half term. Whilst enrolling at an institution a few days late might have little bearing on a young person's transition to sixth form, very late arrival surely does. Further, it may mean that a student has little course choice, as was the case for Maruan, the young man who joined Riverview after a lengthy and, ultimately, unsuccessful negotiation with his secondary school.

Many students at both institutions changed their subject choices within the first few weeks of term. This was often the result of inappropriate subject choices but could also be the outcome of disliking a particular teacher, for example. At St Bernard's, this process was coordinated and overseen by Mr Andrews and Mrs Lovell and was fairly informal, usually involving a student stopping by the sixth form office for a chat. At the much larger Riverview, course changes were overseen by the respective heads of department and involved a paper form which needed to be signed by multiple teachers and stamped and handed in to the administration office where the timetable change would be approved by the assistant principal responsible for data and systems. This unwieldy system was deliberately difficult for students, designed to discourage blasé subject changes and possibly reduce the workload of the assistant principal responsible for the taxing business of timetabling – as one of the heads of department told me, "We can't make it too straightforward or we'll be inundated."

One of my interviewees, Zeynep, changed three out of four of her A-level subjects in the first few weeks at her first sixth form:

"*My original choice was biology, chemistry, English lit or lang. I don't remember which one. I think it might have been lit. And psychology. Those four. And only psychology remained. And it changed to maths, physics, and French. So, it was completely reversed*." – Zeynep, Riverview

Whilst this is quite an extreme example, a high proportion of students change at least one subject, meaning additional work as that they are expected to "catch up". As well as students

making the decision for themselves to change subjects, a number of students at St Bernard's effectively had this choice made for them.

On the Friday of the first week of term, a procession of year 12 students arrived at the sixth form office through the afternoon. Mr Andrews had summoned these students so that he could deliver some bad news: the withdrawal of one (or, in some cases, two) of their A-level subjects. Due to having recruited under the anticipated number of year 12 students, and because of the distribution of their subject choices, it had been decided to cancel first year A-level photography and A-level film studies because of their small class sizes. I was in the sixth form office whilst Mr Andrews delivered this news, individually, to several students, including one girl, Madison, who was having two out of three of her A-level choices cancelled. Whilst I thought that the students deserved an apology, Mr Andrews delivered the news in a business-like and upbeat fashion and told the students to choose a new subject/s from the remaining options on the block, and to let him know of their choices after the weekend.

The students I observed mainly accepted the news with an air of resignation, but Madison, a White working-class girl, was visibly upset at the news, exclaiming "But it's not fair!" and starting to cry. As noted, whilst many students' A-level choices are somewhat arbitrary, Madison pursued photography in her spare time and seemed to have a genuine interest in film. Further, she tearfully explained that she didn't think that she could cope with three "academic" A-levels: what was she meant to do? Mr Andrews suggested that, alongside her remaining business studies A-level, she should consider sociology and media studies, or perhaps she could consider taking one of the BTEC options equivalent to one A-level. I was minded to agree with Madison that what was happening was unfair: given that A-level music only had two year 12 students, it clearly wasn't just about numbers, but about who chose which subjects – and, possibly, how these students might be expected to perform. With both photography and film studies A-level considered at the time to be of more "limited suitability" for progression to the Russell Group universities (Dilnot, 2015) and, given their entry requirements, that they were probably pursued by students with moderate GCSE attainment, it was *these* subjects that were sacrificed, along with the students who had chosen them. This demonstrates how the withdrawal of certain A-level subjects (perhaps those that are regarded as "soft" options) may be more consequential for less privileged students: these are the students more likely to bear the brunt of institutional pressures and cuts.

At no point was it suggested by either Mr Andrews or the students themselves that they might consider alternative sixth form options where they might be able to study their chosen A-level

courses. Whilst this may have been because Mr Andrews had "insider knowledge" as to which sixth forms were still enrolling and knew that students were unlikely to find an alternative place to pursue their first-choice courses, it was also probably the case that he did not suggest this as St Bernard's student numbers were down on the previous year. That students did not suggest looking elsewhere – and none of them did withdraw from the sixth form – may be due to habitus orientation towards the known, and possibly due to not expecting better.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed students' experience of choosing their sixth forms and A-level subjects, and sixth form transition at Riverview and St Bernard's, and have considered some of the implications for students' engagement and achievement at A-level.

As discussed, the largely working-class and minority ethnic students at Riverview and St Bernard's generally had not engaged in the imagined process of careful research and selection of the sixth form that they attended. Rather, they tended to end up at these "recruiting" institutions as a result of a lack of choice or not exercising their choice. This is linked to cultural capital, including in its institutionalised form – i.e., students' GCSE results – and habitus. Being "last chance" or a "non-choice" becomes part of the institutional habitus of the sixth forms, and students having not actively and positively chosen the sixth forms may mean that they are less inclined to accept its rules or policies, or to engage with attempts to foster a positive school culture. The process by which students end up attending Riverview and St Bernard's – and, probably, other recruiting institutions – may mean that students are not necessarily enrolled in the most suitable sixth form environment for them and is disadvantageous for the process of transition.

Students' choice of A-level subjects is clearly of great importance to their engagement and achievement at A-level. Inappropriate subject choices can be seen to be the outcome of a lack of thought or engagement in the choice making process, poor IAG, and a range of institutional pressures. This may mean that young people are studying subjects that they do not enjoy or have a weaker aptitude for, or subjects that are weakly linked to their imagined futures. Institutional pressures at under-recruiting sixth forms both limits the choices available to students and may mean that subjects are dropped after students have started, as happened at St Bernard's.

The induction period at both St Bernard's and Riverview influenced students' perception of the culture of the institution, thus shaping their orientation towards it and their behaviour. The

considerable emphasis on “professionalism” at St Bernard’s led to student complaints that teachers cared more about their uniform than their learning, a perspective likely enhanced when, for example, A-level subjects were withdrawn with little fanfare. Students learnt early on that Riverview was disorganised and, for example, that their time might be wasted by attending sessions with their tutor. For many students, this meant that they never attended tutor periods and so lacked a relationship with the teacher with (at least in theory) overall oversight of their academic progress.

My research thus suggests that St Bernard’s and Riverview students’ choice-making and experience of transition to A-level was a far cry from the model process, which involves carefully considered and rational decisions, and an orderly transition to the ideal sixth form environment. The following chapter will discuss what they experienced as the differences between GCSE and A-level.

Chapter 5: The differences between GCSE and A-level

Quite early on in my fieldwork at St Bernard’s, I was in the sixth form office with Mr Andrews, looking at some data provided by the local authority on that summer’s Key Stage 5 results. He wanted to see if there was any way we could present the data to make it appear as though St Bernard’s was doing comparatively well within the borough. It had been another year of relatively weak A-level achievement, and Mr Andrews was going to have to explain himself to the headteacher. Commenting on this and the general below-national-average A-level achievement within the borough, he said:

“Well let’s be honest right – what everyone’s skirting around and no one wants to say is that we can get kids through GCSEs and they don’t really mean very much: London schools are very successful at playing the system now. But we haven’t found a way to get them through A-levels, and that’s when true ability shows. So, our students getting Bs in their GCSEs are not the students who would’ve got Bs before, and would go on to get Bs in their A-levels.”

This seemed to me to demonstrate misrecognition. Mr Andrews felt that innate ability revealed itself at A-level; rather, I think that it is the influence of students’ cultural capital and (socialised) dispositions to learning that reveals itself at A-level. Further, whilst Mr Andrews seemed to feel that London schools, including St Bernard’s, had been cheating the system, I think that, in many respects, they were cheating s*tudents.* As I will show, schools engage in a range of practices that serve to boost their GCSE results – the most important metric by which schools are judged.

However, this may come at the expense of students developing what would serve as cultural capital and a "scholarly habitus".

The starting point for my PhD research was the recognition of a "gap" between GCSE and A-level achievement in Inner London. Whilst GCSE achievement in Inner London was better than average, A-level achievement was worse. I therefore wanted to explore what students at St Bernard's and Riverview perceived as the differences between GCSEs and A-levels. The key differences identified by students were the volume of content and time available, "spoon-feeding", academic challenge, and the effort required to succeed. These will be considered in turn before moving on to discuss some of the potential reasons why students experienced these differences and why they may have been experienced as problematic.

Content volume and (classroom) time available

The increase in curriculum content – and, for many, the *decrease* in the time available to "master" it – was the most commonly occurring theme in the data on this topic. This was not only prominent in my interview data but also arose frequently in informal conversations with students recorded in field notes, with students regularly expressing their frustration at the sheer volume of content at A-level. This was often framed as being somewhat – or, indeed, completely – overwhelming, and many students spoke of what they regarded as the impossibility of learning and retaining all that they were expected to know:

"There's more to do in A-Levels, and you have to be very detailed and very precise with every single bit of information. You need to know so much... I just needed to know so much and I think it just felt a bit surreal to me." – Hamza, Riverview

"There's so much you're expected to remember and write in exams... just the amount you have to remember. It's too much I think... Honestly, I don't know whether I'll be able to remember it all." – Regina, Riverview

Through both interviews and my informal conversations with students, it transpired that many students' secondary schools either began teaching some GCSE content in year 9 or, in many cases, including at St Bernard's, simply started Key Stage 4 wholesale. Students whose schools had not lengthened Key Stage 4 by a year still reported beginning GCSE content in year 9 in certain core subjects, such as English and science. In English literature, for example, students

reported starting their GCSE modern prose text and their selected Shakespeare play in year 9, returning to these in year 11. This is noteworthy as year 9 is generally designated for Key Stage 3, which has traditionally been three years long and involves a broader curriculum that aims to prepare students for Key Stage 4 but does not include GCSE syllabus content.

GCSEs are designed as a 2-year programme of study. Starting GCSEs in Year 9 effectively meant that schools provided an extra six months to one academic year for Key Stage 4 study, meaning that much of year 11 could be given over to in-class consolidation and revision of familiar content. This meant that many students did most – or, for some, practically *all* – of their GCSE exam preparation in the classroom, directed or at least supervised by their teachers. This was likely particularly true of lower and middle-attainers who may well have "coasted".

Shortening Key Stage 3 in order to increase the time available for Key Stage 4 has a number of potential disadvantages. Most obviously, it reduces the breadth of the curriculum students are exposed to during their time at secondary school. This is likely to be particularly disadvantageous for working-class students who begin school with less cultural capital. The lengthening of Key Stage 4 also runs the risk of potentially reducing student enjoyment of and/or promoting student disengagement from learning due to so much teaching and learning being geared towards public examination performance. For example, several students described how they had become alienated from English by their experiences at GCSE, where they felt that there had been an overly intense focus on select texts for the exam (although some students did acknowledge that this had aided achievement):

"*English is just so drawn out, it's very, like, very drawn out. I feel like when, especially when we was doing books like when we was doing like Of Mice and Men and whatever…. It was very drawn out.*"
– Amy, Riverview

"*We went through Of Mice and Men like line by line. Honestly, we'd do one theme, say, like, loneliness, and go through line by line, and then we'd do the next theme and we'd do it again. I hated – hated – it by the end. But most of us did get As in Lit.*" – Chelsea, St Bernard's

This intense focus on select GCSE texts means that, over the course of my career, very many students have told me that, at secondary school, they only read one book from start to finish: their assigned modern prose text, often *Of Mice and Men*. This was then their default "favourite" book, towards which they often expressed real ambivalence or even serious dislike, many noting the novel's liberal use of the "n word".

As well as beginning Key Stage 4 early, or at least starting to teach some Key Stage 4 content ahead of time, what came through in the data is the incredible effort many secondary schools

expended to secure GCSE achievement – well above and beyond the timetabled lessons. Interventions reported by students included free breakfast for students who came in for teacher-supervised group study before school, lunchtime sessions, and extra after-school classes in most subjects – essentially all additional classroom or school time dedicated to enhancing GCSE achievement. Further, most students reported significant help with coursework in those subjects where it still existed, and some had experienced one-to-one support in certain subjects. This contributed to students' perception that they had been "spoon-fed" at GCSE, as discussed below.

Such efforts, certainly, are not found in all schools, but for the "successful", mainly working-class students featured in this research – students who achieved highly enough at GCSE to be able to progress to A-level – schools' GCSE-focused initiatives were likely important in terms of their results. Students had mixed feelings about their schools' efforts to improve exam results. For example, some saw them as representing the exertion of an unwelcome level of pressure, and others saw the energy directed at GCSE attainment as being primarily in the best interests of the school, but most recognised that they had facilitated their achievement at GCSE.

So, along with Key Stage 4 encroaching on year 9, students at St Bernard's and Riverview reported considerable additional classroom and teacher time beyond timetabled lessons to support them with their GCSEs. When it came to A-levels, then, students identified two key differences compared with GCSEs. The first was the impact of the increase in curriculum content at A-level compared to GCSE. The second was the fact that, whereas many of them had experienced an artificially extended period of time for their GCSEs, their A-levels were confined to approximately 16 months of teaching over two academic years, necessitating a shift in pacing. An aspect of instructional framing, pacing refers to the "rate of the expected learning or acquisition" (Bernstein, 2003a: 103). At GCSE, students experienced slow pacing: they were given additional time to acquire what they were expected to know for their GCSEs. When it came to A-levels, then, students struggled with the fast and strong (i.e., unresponsive to students' rate of acquisition) instructional pacing that was necessitated by the volume of content and (comparatively) restricted time frame:

"I feel like A-levels, you have to learn… With GCSEs, you get two years, more, to learn something. My secondary school, I think we started in year nine. At the end of year nine, that was when we started year ten. So, we had a long time to get used to it. With A-levels, as soon as you go in, you have to start doing your notes. Because your exams are in May, so you either – It's more – Faster, if that makes sense." – Habiba, Riverview

"*During GCSEs, the last two years, it's all about refreshing, memorising, revising. It's not about learning new things. You learnt all the new things in year ten and maybe early year eleven.... With maths, I basically didn't learn anything new since year nine, or year ten. And even year ten, it was July, year ten, and then I had the summer, plus year eleven, plus the other summer. So, that's two summers and a whole year. Like, I'm not going to remember how to learn things again… You're used to being in a certain mentality, certain environment where it's like quite laidback and you would learn something new like every six weeks, or every four weeks, or whatever it was. And then, A levels, it's like bosh, bosh, bosh. And it's like that change in pace, definitely. Definitely, I think, affected me*." – Zeynep, Riverview

This practice of starting to teach Key Stage 4 content in year 9 will likely be improving schools' (and students') GCSE results and is understandable, considering the enormous pressure placed on school leaders in relation to GCSE results, the primary metric by which secondary schools are judged. Headteachers' careers depend on their school's GCSE results. That school leaders would opt to shorten Key Stage 3 and devote an additional half to full school year to Key Stage 4 demonstrates the powerful influence of accountability measures on school behaviours, these not necessarily always in the best interests of students. Along with exposure to a narrowed curriculum and the potential for reduced enjoyment, the lengthening of Key Stage 4 may have an impact in terms of students' orientation towards and development of skills for independent learning. The increase in curriculum content and the *decrease* that many students experienced in terms of classroom time has obvious consequences in terms of what is required of individual students in order to succeed at A-level. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

"Spoon-feeding"

Many students (particularly girls) employed the metaphor of "spoon-feeding" to describe their experiences of teaching and learning at GCSE. The term "spoon-feeding" is employed in a variety of ways in education but is generally critical and can be summarised as the idea that teachers "tell", and learners "absorb", with students becoming "adept at collecting and replicating surface knowledge" (Dehler and Welsh, 2014: 888). "Spoon-feeding" may also entail certain practices such as teachers providing students with notes on a topic rather than students writing their own, limiting the academic labour students engage in. Whilst some have disparaged teacher-led instruction as encouraging the passivity denoted by "spoon-feeding", I would argue that what distinguishes "spoon-feeding" is the focus on students knowing rather than necessarily understanding content, and it should be seen as problematic when it encourages passivity and

discourages critical thinking and deeper subject understanding – see Christodoulou (2014) for a debunking of what she describes as the "myth" of teacher-led instruction as passive.

Whilst the spoon-feeding metaphor has widespread currency in education and is a phrase regularly heard in staffrooms, I wanted to understand what students themselves meant by "spoon-feeding". As noted above, whilst "spoon-feeding" is sometimes employed in relation to particular pedagogic practices such as explicit, teacher-led instruction, students' usage appeared to describe "teaching to the test" – an unrelenting focus on the precise requirements of the mark scheme – and the classroom time dedicated to rehearsal and exam practice. From students' accounts, it seemed to me that the tail had wagged the dog in the relationship between curriculum and examinations; exam content had thoroughly dictated the curriculum for many students:

"*I guess that at GCSE we was spoon-fed really. They'd tell us like* exactly *what we needed to know and like, over and over again*." – Chelsea, St Bernard's

"*I think that we were probably spoon-fed. A few of my teachers, they've said, 'You know, you were spoon-fed at GCSE' and I think that they're right, you know. Because it was like 'this is what you need to know, this is how you write your answers'."* – Alexandra, Riverview

"*We'd do so many, 'This is what you need in an A grade answer', you need three points, you need to use PEE* [the point, evidence, explain structure] *and it was totally like hammered in.*" – Natalie, St Bernard's

In Bernsteinian terms, this can be seen as strong framing in relation to "the educational knowledge transmitted in the pedagogical relationship" (Bernstein, 2003a: 80): seemingly, students were provided with the precise content required for exams. Whilst, clearly, this may have helped to facilitate students' GCSE success, it may have had a range of detrimental effects in terms of the breadth of students' subject knowledge and understanding as well as in relation to their dispositions to learning and development of academic skills.

Whilst male and female students described experiencing similar practices at GCSE, girls were more likely to refer to "spoon-feeding". This may be an outcome of boys wishing to position themselves as more independent or may reflect teacher-held stereotypes about boys' and girls' learning. Girls may be positioned as "diligent" and "plodding" (Francis and Skelton, 2005), passively absorbing that which they are fed, whilst boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be seen as naturally "brilliant" (ibid), and this may influence how teachers frame their assessments of students' experiences and learning:

"*I wouldn't say that we were spoon-fed, no. I would say that I was quite independent – not as much as now obviously. But, yeah, there was a lot of support, after school lessons and that, and a lot of practice and, like, tests, tests, tests. They held us to a really high standard."* – Ibrahim, Riverview

Two interviewees explicitly linked spoon-feeding with practices of setting and streaming, the implication seeming to be that particular groupings of students were instructed with precisely what they needed to know and to do in order to achieve the [minimum] grade that was expected of them based on their set:

"*I think with GCSEs there was a lot more spoon-feeding. There was a lot more spoon feeding because I think there would be setting and streaming within the GCSEs. And it's like, okay A stars; as you're going to pass anyway, so we'll just leave you. And then those who got Es and Ds, we'll leave you because you're going to fail anyway. And then there was that middle bracket of Bs and Cs. And I felt like the school handled it, they focused on them a lot more. And it was just they were then given extra classes, extra tuition after school and everything. And that is a lot of spoon-feeding towards their GCSEs than letting the students go away and do their own.*" – Samilaah, Riverview

Samilaah studied A-level sociology, and I think that this may have been a misinterpretation of Gillborn and Youdell's work, which featured in the textbook. According to Gillborn and Youdell (2000), previous school accountability measures incentivised "triage" and a focus on what they term the "borderline" cases, who are close to meeting the expected standard – generally the Es and Ds – to the potential neglect of other students. Judging by her GCSE grades, Samilaah had been very much within what she described as "*that middle bracket of Bs and Cs*" yet placed herself outside of this with the use of third-person pronouns. This may have been because she did not want it to appear to me as though *she* had experienced the special attention that she describes. However, whilst there may be some inconsistencies in Samilaah's account, it is interesting to see her making the link made between "spoon-feeding" and what can be seen as educational "rationing" (ibid), which is likely to be to the particular detriment of working-class and certain minority ethnic groups.

Other students also mentioned the way in which their schools had emphasised their GCSE target grades, and it was often expected that students could cite these. Target grades are calculated using a variety of different methods, and secondary schools often create "flight paths" for students when they begin secondary school, based on their Key Stage 2 results: a linear rate of progress towards GCSE is assumed. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) have dubbed this "the new IQism" and suggest that such practices label working-class and some minority ethnic pupils as likely failures. Practices to emphasise target grades mentioned by students included exercise

books liberally stickered with those targets and "target sheets" for students to complete whenever they received marked work. Whilst it is likely that the use of target grades is intended to underline teacher accountability and to motivate students, the "publication" of target grades provoked some very negative responses in students, and many felt that these communicated low expectations. Further, some suspected that lower target grades meant that they were not stretched and challenged – they were "fed" only what they needed to attain the target grade:

"*In English, we all had stickers on our exercise books with our target grades on and mine was a C! That pissed me off, man. I weren't aiming for a C; I knew that I wanted at least a B, at least. And cos I was in set two, it made me think: are they only teaching me up to like a C grade level? Cos that's my* [silly voice] *'target grade'. I don't actually think they was cos I know my teacher said we should all get Bs, but I did wonder what set one was getting that we wasn't.*" – Tara, St Bernard's

As a result of the lengthening of Key Stage 4 and (possibly stratified) spoon-feeding, many students seemed to have experienced a very narrow secondary curriculum. Students' accounts of this – for example, reading only a single novel during the course of their secondary schooling – stand in sharp contrast to Khan's (2011) description of the curriculum at the elite St Paul's School, where students are told that they can learn the central ideas of Western culture. Of this, Khan comments, "Students are asked to make the impossible possible, and they are encouraged to believe that the grand sweep of the world is knowable to them" (ibid: 155), remarking that the scope of the programme "is both thrilling and terrifying" (ibid: 159). Whilst St Paul's students do not necessarily *know* much by the end (ibid), this exposure to a vast curriculum cultivates ways of thinking that form part of embodied privilege. This sits in stark contrast to the limited curriculum many of my participants experienced at their inner-city state secondaries, suggesting that the social stratification of knowledge (Anyon, 1981) still occurs.

As well as wanting to understand what students meant by "spoon-feeding", I also queried why, if "spoon-feeding" had proved to be a successful strategy for facilitating students' exam success at GCSE, they thought that teachers did not maintain this approach when it came to A-level teaching.

Some students felt that there was possibly a *deliberate* shift at A-level away from what they saw as a spoon-feeding approach, possibly aimed at better preparing students for university, even if this was to the detriment of their grades:

Habiba: *I feel like GCSE is very spoon-fed. This is what you do, this is what you have to do to get the exam. This is how you write it. Our teacher would literally write out our coursework, and show us how to write coursework, and we would basically, not copy it, but look at it.*

NL: *Why do they not just do that at A-level?*

Habiba: *Because I feel like they want us to learn. Because in uni it's not going to be like that.*

NL: *So, do you think that teachers could be teaching in a way that would help students get better grades?*

Habiba: *Yes.*

There may be some truth in this: teachers want their A-level students to be developing independent learning skills and are aware that certain spoon-feeding strategies – such as providing students with topic notes – may prove counterproductive. However, I am unconvinced that A-level teachers would prioritise academically challenging students to better prepare them for higher education over whatever pedagogic practices would facilitate the best A-level results. To extend the feeding metaphor, I do not think that most teachers would deliberately allow students to "go hungry". Rather, I think that it is more likely that the pedagogic shift that students perceived from GCSE to A-level is mainly the outcome of the increase in content volume and the accompanying necessity of fast pacing. This was largely supported by teachers' accounts. For example, one humanities teacher at Riverview told me that whilst there were points that she tried to emphasise and return to over and over again, they had to move so quickly through the curriculum that it sometimes felt that they had barely started a topic before they had to move on, describing it as a "whistle-stop tour". This was particularly problematic in the context of many students having patchy attendance and lacking the proclivity to "catch up". Further, whilst a criticism of the pre-reform, legacy GCSEs was that they rewarded the collection and replication of surface knowledge, the emphasis on the application of knowledge and analysis within A-level exams means that deeper understanding is required. This understanding is likely facilitated by students' individual academic labour and deeper cognitive engagement as opposed to spoon-feeding by teachers.

Along with the lengthening of Key Stage 4 and considerable classroom time beyond timetabled lessons, this focus on the mark scheme requirements and the extensive rehearsal and exam practice within the classroom meant that students did not necessarily need to do much independent work outside the classroom to prepare for and receive at least adequate grades for their GCSEs. It may be that successful London schools serving deprived intakes reorient their pedagogic practice in terms of instructional pacing and selection, this in line with Bernstein's prediction:

"Where the catchment area of a school draws upon a lower working-class community it is likely … that the school will adopt strategies, or have strategies forced upon it, which will affect both

the content and the pacing of the transmission. The content is likely to stress operations, local skills rather than the exploration of principles and general skills, and the pacing is likely to be weakened." (Bernstein, 2003b: 206)

However, whilst Bernstein (2003a) claims that academic success requires two sites of pedagogic acquisition, this reorientation of pedagogic practice means that students do not necessarily need this second site of acquisition: many students can perform at least adequately solely through their classroom engagement. In light of the increase in pacing and diminution of spoon-feeding, for students to achieve at A-level, they *need* to be engaged in considerable independent academic work but have not necessarily developed the skills for this. This was a problem many students themselves recognised, and I heard frequent complaints from students that they lacked the skills – for example, note-taking and revision skills – required for academic success at A-level.

Overall, whilst students obviously associated the diminution of spoon-feeding with the increased difficulty of A-levels compared to GCSE, they appeared generally accepting of, rather than disappointed by, what they saw as its removal – they had absorbed the message of the need for greater self-sufficiency, even if they did not (or could not) necessarily enact it. Students' experiences of and perspectives on A-level teaching practices will be discussed in the next chapter.

Academic challenge

Academic challenge beyond that simply resulting from the increase in content was also mentioned by most interviewees – although there were some nuances in relation to this, which will be discussed. Whilst increased academic challenge perhaps ought to be expected – and often students had been "warned" – it still seemed to take some students by surprise:

"Everyone said it was going to be hard but it didn't really click. And then – not in early lessons but when I was really getting stuck into it, I'd realise 'Ah I don't understand' this, and that'd make me angry." – Lejila, St Bernard's

"Then when I got here, it's like, this is so hard. At the start it's quite overwhelming. Because there's a lot of knowledge thrown at you, and you just don't know what to do with it…" – Habiba, Riverview

Both Habiba and Lejila describe something of an emotional response to the increased academic challenge of A-levels – responses to challenge will be discussed later on in the thesis.

Whilst most interviewees and many other students raised the issue of the increased academic challenge of A-levels, many made the case that it was their subjects or a very specific aspect of a subject that presented particular academic challenge. Some students suggested that *their* A-level subjects were particularly difficult, a claim made most frequently by boys, in relation to maths and physics – "traditional" and masculine-coded subjects:

"*Maths, not all of it, but some of it is really hard. I think much harder than other subjects. My teacher said that some of the content is harder than his degree was*." – Alistair, St Bernard's

"*But what we did was quantum phenomena and molecular physics as well… You need to know so much and especially for physics. You couldn't do that* [wing it] *in physics, it's different*." – Hamza, Riverview

"With physics, again, you think, oh, it's physics is physics, right? But so many new things. Like, new formulas, new like mentality that you need to know. New things that you didn't even realise were rules in physics. You're like, 'wait, that's a thing?' kind of thing. Yeah, some subjects are definitely harder." – Zeynep, Riverview

The idea that students' own subjects represented a higher level of academic challenge than other subjects may have been a genuinely held belief and might have been encouraged by certain subject teachers – as described in the previous chapter, teachers could be found to hold common-sense assumptions about the nature (and hierarchy) of different A-level subjects. However, such claims could also be an outcome of students emphasising their intelligence or, where they were struggling, students' efforts to protect their self-worth (Covington, 1984) and ensure that they were not perceived as unintelligent: it was not that they could not cope with the academic challenge of A-level, but, rather, that their own subjects were particularly challenging – as noted by Jackson (2003), failure with an excuse is not so bad.

Rather than referring to the general difficulty of A-levels, several interviewees made reference to a specific element of a particular subject, occasionally within a specific exam board's specification. For example, over the course of my research, many students described the difficulty they had experienced with A-level mathematics module Core Maths 4 (C4):

"*C4 came around and completely dashed those hopes. 'Cause – when I say* [it's] *some other language. It was like another language. It was like doing like, I dunno, like doing Swahili, or something. And I'm obviously for learning new things, but it's like everything that you knew about certain stuff is completely dashed. So, what you're used to for the past seven years is gone. You have to learn it again in a couple of months and do it well enough to get a good grade on it... Again, I think C4 was like, a turning point for me. And once we started learning C4, it bled into my other*

subjects. Less so for psychology, but definitely more for French. It was like, lack of confidence, stress, pressure. I didn't understand. I just didn't understand it. And every time I thought, okay, I understand it, every time there was an exam question, I was suddenly like, I don't understand it. Like I'm getting this wrong... I left the exam hall knowing I completely bombed the test. It was so bad. I left it knowing I'd got a zero UMS in it. Or not a zero, but that's how it felt. It was so bad. But looking at Edexcel [a different exam board], *I could at least comfortably get like 50%, and I haven't even revised it in a year. That kind of thing. So, it was just really annoying. Like that was the thing that really got me annoyed about maths. I think if I did it literally anywhere else, I would have got, comfortably, a B. And then like it's like a knock-on effect. I wouldn't be so put off by it. I wouldn't have lost my confidence if I knew that I was doing well*." – Zeynep, Riverview

Here Zeynep powerfully expresses the way in which this particular mathematics module seemed to her so completely different from what she had learnt previously that it challenged the mathematical understanding that she had developed over her entire time at secondary school. It seemed that she felt that it had somehow *undone* her understanding of maths – a subject at which she had excelled at GCSE. This "*bled into"* her other subjects, shaking her confidence in her abilities beyond maths, and caused considerable stress during her first attempt at A-levels at the college she had attended prior to Riverview.

At Riverview, C4 had attained notoriety, taking on an almost folkloric status, the cause of much moaning, groaning and fear, and my fieldnotes contain many student references to it – I several times found students in a state of exaggerated despair attributed to C4, expressed in claims that they were going to "die" or it was "killing" them. The reputation of and attitudes towards C4 may demonstrate the very real higher level of difficulty of this module or may reflect peer influence and what Burgess et al. (2018) describe as social contagion – the involuntary "catching" and spread of attitudes or behaviours across connected individuals – which research has found to be prevalent within school environments (ibid). Students' emphasis on the difficulty of this module may have increased student anxiety as they anticipated a high level of difficulty. Such anxieties – or, even, fear – may encourage disengagement (Jackson, 2013).

Other students suggested that an increased level of academic challenge was compounded by the fact that they had selected A-level subjects that were new to them:

"*It was a lot to get my head round in the first few weeks because I was doing mainly new subjects which I think is probably much harder than if you just stick with the subjects that you done at GCSE*." – Tara, St Bernard's

"I'll be honest, there was a lot of stuff that I'd never heard of before. Like in politics – I realised there really was so much that was totally new, all these things I'd heard of but couldn't really

explain what they was. In GCSEs there wasn't anything new. What I mean is my options – I'd already done them all before. So that makes A-levels a lot more difficult I think." – Dawit, Riverview

Of course, students do not necessarily know that their chosen new subjects were more difficult than the alternative options, but this perception is still interesting and may have contributed to students feeling overwhelmed, as described in the previous section. As discussed in the previous chapter, students' A-level subject choices are likely to be restricted by their GCSE grades. Whilst Riverview subscribed to minimum grade requirements, with further maths the only A-level subject requiring a specific higher grade, lower or middle attainers at GCSE may still be encouraged to pursue new subjects. As discussed in the last chapter, many students made *negative* A-level choices, seeking to avoid those subjects they felt that they had lacked interest in or aptitude for at GCSE. Whilst a selection of new subjects may well prove to be the right choice for students – as, indeed, it was for me – if students then find that the unfamiliarity of several new subjects together represents an increased academic challenge, this may well prove to be problematic. Lower to middle-attaining students at St Bernard's would have found themselves with a restricted choice of A-levels and, thus, having to acclimatise to several new subjects together.

Whilst not usually expressed in these terms, a few students noted the challenge of needing to show "flair" in literature-based A-level subjects:

"*Again, that flair thing where you have to be, not just confident, but you have to like understand. So, not only are you learning new things, you're memorising new things, but you have to understand it enough to work around it and add new things. And add your own touch to it, kind of thing."* – Zeynep, Riverview

Adding one's "*own touch"* is not something required or necessarily encouraged at GCSE. It can also be seen as a manifestation of cultural capital – effectively placing value on knowledge which has not been acquired within the classroom. Students often noted that their teachers recommended that they "read around" their subjects. This was advice very few seemed to follow, possibly not even knowing where to start, and the notion that students should be expected to bring in "extra" knowledge or provide their "own touch" tended to be seen as quite bewildering. Students' independent work is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Whilst most students expressed the view that A-levels represented a marked increase in difficulty, several interviewees were ambivalent about or denied the relevance of increased academic challenge. A few students, mainly male, suggested that, rather than finding A-levels

particularly difficult, it was the workload and content volume that provided any challenge that they were experiencing:

"*No, I haven't found anything hard really, it's more just keeping on top of it all.*" – Paul, St Bernard's

"*I mean in terms of difficulty I think for me personally I'm able to understand everything but it's how much I can take. People say that A-levels are a massive step up but not for me really.*" – Hamza, Riverview

However, despite these claims, these students each made contradictory statements within the same interview – i.e., acknowledging or complaining about the difficulty of A-levels. That students would suggest that they were not finding A-levels academically challenging when this did not seem to be true supports the idea that there may be a cultural cachet associated with finding academic work easy and "effortless achievement" (Dweck, 2006; Jackson, 2006a), and this is particularly associated with masculinity (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Students' denial of academic challenge may also have been influenced by my own position as a researcher – by dint of doing a PhD, all interviewees would have been aware that I had been "successful" in my educational "career". It may be that it was easier for my interviewees to admit to finding the workload too great than the content too difficult, which, from the perspective of the student, may have run the risk of suggesting to me that they were not academically capable.

Effort required to succeed

Unsurprisingly, the increase in the volume of content at A-level along with the greater academic challenge acknowledged by most, if not all, students means that a higher level of personal effort is likely required in order to succeed at A-levels compared to GCSEs. Most interviewees reported an understanding of this, although for very many this understanding had only truly dawned quite late on in the academic year or following the receipt of poor AS results at the end of year one. Many of those students who did recognise the greater effort required to succeed at A-level – or, indeed, simply pass – also reported that, for various reasons, they did not necessarily expend this greater effort. This will be discussed later in the thesis.

Many students expressed the view that extensive revision had not really been necessary at GCSE:

"*I don't really think I revised. Like, I would try and revise for the geography exam a week before my exam, when I didn't really contribute anything to geography the whole entire year… If you're, like, not stupid, you didn't really need to revise for GCSE.*" – Simarjit, St Bernard's

"*I never used to revise... I just went to WHSmiths and bought A and A* maths GCSEs revision books, but all I did was revise the A and A star bit because I just thought anything B and below, I get it. Like I'll learn it in lesson, anything A and A star, that's all I'll revise."* – Lejila, St Bernard's

Further, several students stated that very high grades at GCSE could be (and were) achieved with minimal effort:

"*It's like before in GCSEs you could study for a day and get an A-star.*" – Regina, Riverview

Whilst Regina's claim is obviously hyperbolic, the idea of relatively effortless achievement at GCSE was a common theme in interviews. This may be partly due to the fact that, for many students, most of their preparation for GCSEs was done within the classroom rather than independently. However, it may also reflect how particular value is placed on "effortless achievement", as to achieve academically without having needed to work hard provides clear signals about an individual's ability (Jackson, 2006a), and this may be particularly important for students experiencing difficulties with A-levels. Students' accounts of the academic effort expended to achieve their GCSEs is, therefore, subjective and potentially subject to a form of social desirability bias. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that students can succeed at GCSE with considerably less effort than is required at A-level, the exaggerated version of this claim – that it was possible to achieve top grades through very last-minute preparation – was not made by those students who had achieved very highly, as it almost certainly did require some sustained effort, even if that was less than would be required at A-level. Regina, notably, *did not* achieve any As or A*s in her GCSEs.

Regina continued her account:

"*Like here* [at sixth form college] *you could study for a week and still fail your exam and that's a huge difference*."

As a first-year student, the "exams" that Regina was referring to were class tests as opposed to public examinations, which, hopefully, she would expect to spend longer than a week preparing for. Regardless, she clearly saw a significant difference between the demands of GCSE and the first year of A-level in terms of the volume of content and the amount to be learnt in order to even achieve a mark constituting a pass. This difference between GCSE and A-level in the required level of preparation for assessment was reflected in many other students' accounts:

"A-levels have so much more content. Like you couldn't revise two days before an A-level exam." – Amy, Riverview

"So, at GCSE you kind of knew the gist of it like you knew – it was basically touching the surface of every single subject, right? And then you could go into the exam without doing past papers and probably do well in it. But at A-level you kind of had to do past papers you have to make sure you know exam techniques and if you don't know the exam techniques and you're kind of, you're doomed to fail basically." – Jamila, Riverview

Jamila was one of the many students who emphasised spoon-feeding at GCSE, an element of which was the focus on the precise requirements of the exam – students *did know* exam techniques at GCSE. Therefore, what I think that she is identifying here is that, at A-level, learning exam techniques and exam practice may need to be carried out largely independently as there are simply not the classroom hours to do it all.

A number of students reported feeling overconfident as a result of their GCSE results, even when these were for retakes, as was the case for Fawzia:

"When I retook my additional science GCSE in the June of the same year [as her BTEC]*, I went through the information. I entered myself in April, learnt the information in two months, and I got As in the exam. So, I'm like, yes, it's fine. You're smart. At that time, my confidence boosted up. And I'm like, yes, it's fine. It's easy. You can do A levels too. It's okay. But that's the thing. I think that's what affected it*." – Fawzia, Riverview

Fawzia then discovered that employing a similar strategy and succeeding was unlikely at A-level:

"Unless you're very smart, I think that's very impossible, because I realised that A levels, you just practise. You need to practise, practise, practise, practise to get a good grade."

Similarly, Maruan reflected on the trap that some students who achieved highly at GCSE fell into as a result of their prior experiences:

*"So, what the main problem is that these people think that GCSEs is the same as A-levels. So, when you compare GCSEs and A-levels, you don't realise the difference until you actually get into it and you realise there's a lot of things to learn. I know people that [got] A*s for their GCSEs, but when they came to the A-levels, they didn't do that well, because they relied on their past. And if you rely on your past and you say that, 'okay, I'm already smart, no one's smarter than me, I'm the smartest guy here, I've got these GCSEs that no one has'. Okay, that was GCSEs, but again the level of GCSE compared to A-levels is a big gap, you don't realise the gap until you're into it, until you're actually mid through the first year, then you realise that."* – Maruan, Riverview

However, the realisation of the considerable difference between GCSE and A-level did not necessarily inspire students to make greater effort but, in fact, could prove "off-putting" – students' independent work and responses to challenge are discussed in Chapter 7.

Discussion

In this chapter, I have outlined the key differences students reported that they found between GCSE and A-levels: the content volume and (classroom) time available, "spoon-feeding", the academic challenge, and the effort required to succeed – or, indeed, to even gain a qualification. These are not discrete but, rather, overlap and interact; this is discussed below. Students' experiences at secondary school shaped their understanding of and orientations towards learning.

Through my research, it emerged that students' secondary schools had engaged in a range of practices aimed at boosting GCSE achievement, practices which could be regarded as "gaming". As discussed in the introduction, London schools have improved enormously over the past decade and a half. Many, including Ofsted (2010), have attributed this improvement, at least in part, to the impact of London Challenge, a London-wide school improvement programme implemented in 2003. One of the key features of London Challenge was the development of school-wide systems to track pupil progress and provide intervention where pupils were at risk of underachieving at GCSE, as well as to evaluate the "effectiveness" of teaching. Benchmarked data was used "as a powerful mechanism for challenging underperformance and holding schools to account" (McAleavy and Elwick, 2015).

In the years since the implementation of London Challenge, many London schools have become well-oiled machines for ensuring students achieve at GCSE. Whilst the unabating focus on GCSE results has been criticised by some as leading schools to resemble "exam factories" (Hutchings, 2015), the improvement of London's schools and the resulting enhanced life chances for children in London, achieved in no small part through the impressive commitment and dedication of teaching staff, is worthy of celebration. However, the relentless focus on GCSE achievement and the strategies employed to ensure school-level success may have come at the expense of students experiencing a broad curriculum, and developing the dispositions towards learning and academic skills required to succeed at A-level, when much more is required of individual students. Students do not develop as self-regulated learners or develop what we might term a "scholarly habitus" (Watkins and Noble, 2013) shaped towards the independent learning actions which are likely to be required for academic success at A-level. As argued by

Gewirtz, school practices and processes have "become increasingly shaped by the requirements of performance monitoring systems rather than the interests of students" (2002: 172).

As well as students not necessarily developing a "scholarly habitus", the issues identified by St Bernard's and Riverview students as key differences between GCSE and A-level served to compound one another. Students who were accustomed to additional classroom time beyond the designed number of delivery hours for a qualification now had to complete their A-levels within a limited time frame. Whilst GCSE students are continuing students, A-level students often transfer to a new institution, and, as described in the previous chapter, relatively little learning may take place in the first few weeks of term at A-level, further increasing the time pressure. Additionally, due to the volume of content at A-level, it is likely that little time is allocated for consolidation within the classroom. However, this is not necessarily explicitly communicated to or understood by students. Students may be overconfident due to not understanding that they had effectively been given "extra time" at GCSE that will not be available if they complete their A-levels within two years. Together, these issues contribute to students' perception that there is simply too much to learn in too little time. The spoon-feeding that students describe having experienced at GCSE is replaced by a requirement for academic self-regulation in order to cope with the increased content, pacing, and academic challenge of A-levels. All of this means that considerably more *individual* effort is required if they are to succeed.

Overall, St Bernard's and Riverview students identified that their various experiences of year 11 at multiple different schools had not effectively prepared them to move on to the next stage of their learning careers. The following chapter will discuss students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level.

Chapter 6: Inside the classroom

What happens within an educational institution's classrooms is obviously of great importance in terms of students' academic engagement and achievement. Issues relating to teaching and learning within the classroom constituted a key topic in my informal conversations and interviews with students, as well as conversations with teaching staff. In the previous chapter I discussed the key differences between GCSE and A-level identified by students at St Bernard's and Riverview. In this chapter I will flesh out students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level. Students raised a wide range of issues of relation to their experiences of teaching and learning in the classroom. Some of these were institutional-level issues, such as teacher absences and turnover, whilst others related to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and feedback, and student-teacher relationships. I have drawn on Bernstein's work on pedagogy to understand my data, considering the different elements of instructional discourse, and distinguishing between visible and invisible pedagogies.

Teacher absences and turnover

Many students reported having experienced what we might regard as "institutional" problems with teaching at Riverview and, for many re-sitters, the sixth form they had attended prior to Riverview, in the form of teacher absences and turnover. Students reported a large number of lessons missed due to teacher absences, including when teachers left:

"The teachers, it was just nobody cared and not even those teaching you, they didn't care. They used to – you used to turn up for the lesson, and no one –the teachers wouldn't be there like, or you just get a text like half an hour before like you – I'd travel an hour and a half. And then I've got a text ten minutes before the lesson saying he's sick, he's not going to be in and I'm just like, and it used to cost, and the thing is as well, it used to cost me so much money." – Amy, Riverview (commenting on her previous college)

Whilst some of these lessons would be staffed by a "cover" teacher who would register students and supervise their independent work within the classroom, often students would be greeted with an A4 paper sign stuck on the classroom door informing them that the lesson was cancelled due to staff absence. This would obviously not be allowed during compulsory schooling, where students have to be registered and supervised by law, and does not tend to happen in school sixth forms. Given that most students had not developed an orientation

towards self-regulated learning, students reported that these cancelled sessions would be used for "chilling" or "going down Maccers".

Whilst, anecdotally, St Bernard's had reasonably high teacher turnover, teachers did not tend to leave mid-year, and this was not something that students mentioned as having been a problem during their sixth form experience. Several A-level teachers left midway through the academic year during my fieldwork at Riverview, the majority following the downgrading of the college's Ofsted rating to "Requires Improvement" – "rats leaving a sinking ship", as one humanities teacher put it to me wryly. Numerous Riverview students had experienced teachers leaving part-way through the academic year, both at Riverview and their previous sixth forms, some students having multiple short-term teachers (often agency staff) for certain subjects. Sometimes teachers were seen to have "disappeared" – to have left abruptly, without warning. When this happened, wild rumours often spread amongst students, growing more elaborate with each retelling. One silly and baseless rumour involved a science teacher having been caught mid-intercourse with another staff member, and another involved a humanities teacher having been found to be selling drugs to students: students *wanted* teachers to have left for some extraordinary reason. In fact, there tended to be a much more prosaic explanation for teachers leaving Riverview: challenging working conditions and concerns regarding job security because of student recruitment issues.

Overall, high teacher turnover disrupts teaching and learning. This disruption is particularly problematic given the significant time pressure of A-levels discussed previously. Students described experiences of both missing content and the repetition of content: particularly where teachers left abruptly, it appeared that often there were not adequate handovers to incoming teachers. Students also described as challenging the need to get to know and build a relationship with new teachers: student-teacher relationships are discussed later on in the chapter. Where *multiple* teachers leave, as was experienced at Riverview, this can be very disconcerting for students and, indeed, the remaining staff, and often contributes to increased workloads and low morale. Teacher turnover and the issues accompanying it can be implicated in student disengagement: many students told me that a teacher leaving made them feel like giving up in that subject. This demonstrates the reliance that students felt on their teachers, as few students had developed a "scholarly habitus". Some students identified experiencing many changes of teacher as a key reason for underperformance. However, not all students made this link, and, despite describing experiencing high turnover and teachers who were frequently absent, some students still seemed to blame themselves for their poor performance. Torrance (2017) notes how, in the context of neo-liberalism, examinations have provided the "quintessential vehicle

for individualising and responsibilising success and failure" (2017: 92), and this could be seen in students' accounts.

Riverview students' experiences are underpinned by the issue of teacher shortages, with serious recruitment and retention issues within the profession (Education Policy Institute, 2020). High teacher turnover represents a bigger problem in London, with young teachers both leaving the profession and moving elsewhere, primarily due to the cost of living (Worth et al., 2018). Teacher shortages and high teacher turnover may disproportionately affect disadvantaged children, who are not only more reliant on their school but are more likely to attend the schools facing the most severe staffing challenges (Allen and McInerney, 2019). Riverview is a low-ranking, recruiting institution: high teacher turnover is much more likely to affect students attending such institutions than those attending highly-subscribed, selective sixth forms. The combination of teacher turnover and student recruitment issues can lead to a vicious cycle of an institution in decline, and this is likely worsened when this is publicly "verified" by a poor Ofsted rating.

Curriculum and knowledge

Curriculum

Bernstein notes that the "constellation called a curriculum" emerges from a system of choices which are social in nature (Bernstein, 2003: 72). This is most obvious in relation to an institution's curriculum offer – and students' choices within this – but also choices made within individual subjects.

Compared to GCSE, where students are still following the national curriculum, at A-level, notwithstanding those constraints discussed previously, including GCSE grades and option blocks, students enjoy greater freedom in their choice of subjects. Further, the curriculum "opens up" considerably at A-level, allowing much greater teacher discretion when deciding the course content for most subjects. For example, for my subject, sociology (AQA), at GCSE all students follow the exact same specification with no options. At A-level, one of the three (equally weighted) papers is comprised of option topics, with teachers choosing one of four options for both year one and year two. This specification flexibility of "options" alongside the compulsory elements is similar across different A-levels.

At both St Bernard's and Riverview, A-level options were decided by subject teachers, and teachers I spoke to had different explanations for their curriculum choices. Some had simply inherited specifications and curriculum choices and had not sought to change them, whilst

others chose options based on what they believed would be “easiest” for students. Most frequently, however, choices were related to teachers’ own subject knowledge: teachers were more likely to choose an option that they had taught previously or that was related to an area that they themselves had studied at A-level or during their degree. There are clear advantages to teachers being able to teach to their “strengths”. However, particularly in relation to humanities subjects, the cumulative choices of a largely White teaching workforce (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020) may lead to an inadvertent narrowing of the curriculum, potentially rendering it ethnocentric.

Some students complained about perceived curriculum absences. For example, Tara (St Bernard’s) wished that she had been given the opportunity to learn more “Black history” – “*not just about slavery*” – and regretted the year 13 focus on the Tudors which she saw as lacking relevance to her life. It has been noted that teachers may lack knowledge of the histories and contribution made by Black and other minority ethnic communities in the UK. This shapes what young people learn (Bhopal, 2018), and possibly contributed to what was experienced by Tara as a curriculum lacuna. Similarly, Lejila (St Bernard’s) complained of only studying Christianity in philosophy and ethics, which, despite having attended a Christian secondary school, she felt disadvantaged non-Christian students, herself included. Fahim (St Bernard’s) and Abdullah (Riverview) complained that their economics A-level courses had not provided them with the hoped for understanding of, respectively, the mechanisms of currency exchange, and the financial crisis. Whilst it is possible that Fahim and Abdullah’s complaints were based on unrealistic expectations (possibly because of how teachers “pitched” the subject), Tara and Lejila’s seemed completely reasonable.

Other students had specific and direct complaints about aspects of the curriculum in certain subjects:

“*It was like the work as well. The book that we was reading, one of them was* Under Milk Wood*. It was a book that was based in Wales and the words was like ‘och aye black bean dadada’ like it was like not even English. So, it was just something, it was just, I don't know it was the most uninteresting thing I've ever done like to date. Like to date that was the most uninteresting thing I've ever done. I'd never ever do it again, ever*.” – Amy, Riverview (commenting on her previous college)

Amy was an extremely capable student who had the academic ability to access any text on the A-level specification. However, she felt this choice of drama was inappropriate – boring, and too difficult, in language that she could not understand – and resented her teacher for having made

it. This contributed to her disengagement from English literature and, eventually, her complete disengagement from college. Her position was only confirmed when she learnt that literature students at Riverview studied *A Streetcar Named Desire* as their drama text, which she suggested was "*obviously so much better*", despite not knowing anything about the play. Her belief in its obvious superiority can either be interpreted as arising from others' accounts comparing favourably to her own experience or be attributed to it being a play and playwright that she had *heard of* whilst Dylan Thomas was entirely unfamiliar to her. Sullivan (2007) operationalises teenagers' "cultural knowledge" – a component of cultural capital – as familiarity with famous cultural figures, and Amy's cultural capital did not extend to knowing or caring about Dylan Thomas.

When discussing areas of particular enjoyment during their A-level studies, many students referred to topics that they had found particularly interesting due to a personal connection or because it allowed them to explore or better understand aspects of their own identity. For example, with some conditions, history students at Riverview were able to write their history coursework on a topic of their own choosing, and Ahmed, a Somali student, wrote his on the role of oral poetry in Somali culture. He evidently hugely enjoyed the research, talked about his chosen topic with great enthusiasm, and received a high A* for the work he produced. He greatly appreciated this opportunity which, he understood, students at other schools did not necessarily receive. Dawit and Maruan (Riverview) both referenced particularly enjoying areas of economics A-level where they could bring in their understanding of the issues affecting their or their parents' countries of heritage (Eritrea and Morocco respectively), and both talked about wanting to study economics at university in order to work in development in these countries. Simarjit (St Bernard's) complained that most of the curriculum content of her A-levels was boring and lacked relevance to her life. However, during one of our bi-weekly sociology sessions, she became animated at the opportunity to discuss the religion she had been brought up in, commenting at the end of the session, "Oh my God; why can't sociology always be like that? Honestly Miss, that was so fun!"

Whilst Amy had deeply resented her English teacher's curriculum choices, she was full of praise for those of her film studies teacher:

"Film studies, film studies is so good... I've literally been revising and I try so hard in that lesson. But it's like the movies that we're watching like Four Lions*, like one of my favourite films,* Goodfellows*, literally my favourite film,* The Godfather*, not* The Godfather, American Gangster*, like it's like such interesting films, but it's like when you're interested in something you have so much to say, whereas when I was doing English literature, I didn't care I didn't even want to read it. So for me to now write and compare and say 'oh the blue signifies this and that' I just, and it was like you know*

when you're into something, it's like do you ever write an essay, and you're like 'Oh my god, what's the word count again?' because you've gone over, and you just like have to minimize it and you get so into it, like even when I do my coursework, I get so into it and he's like, you have to make it smaller, and I'm like 'no, I can't!' Because you don't understand, I have so much to say yeah, I have so much to say. It's so weird because I never even heard about it. And then now it's like my favourite thing!" – Amy, Riverview

In all of these examples, a virtuous circle of knowledge, engagement, and enjoyment can be seen, suggesting the value of allowing and encouraging students to draw on their cultural knowledge and interests.

Curriculum can be seen as "a mediated product, or a lived exchange between student and teacher" (Brown and Kelly, 2001: 501). This is particularly true at A-level, where teachers tend to have more freedom as to what they choose to teach due to the generally more flexible nature of A-level specifications. Curriculum choices and how they are presented can serve to foster engagement or contribute to student disengagement. Knowing that a teacher (particularly an unfavoured teacher) had *chosen* the content that a student was struggling with could mean that the student would choose to withdraw effort in a way that they might not for the compulsory elements of the specification.

Subject splits and subject combinations

Many students reported experiencing for the first time the curriculum of a subject being split between two teachers. This seemed to be more common at A-level than at GCSE, with different teachers taking responsibility for different components of the syllabus. Whilst some students liked the variety that this offered, many students complained that this was confusing both in terms of their personal organisation – for example, remembering which materials they needed for which class – and intellectually, and it seemed to lead to the subject feeling disjointed for them:

"*So, it was different because we had two teachers for each subject so we would balance between teachers. So, one teacher would teach us. So, when it came to economics, I found it very difficult because the teaching was very weird in some cases because you'd learn about macroeconomic objectives and everything to do with international economy. And then we'll learn about national economy and then I sort of got confused between the both... So that's something I wasn't quite familiar with and that sort of disorientated me in some cases*." – Hamza, Riverview

In the humanities department at Riverview, the division of topics between teachers was a new policy apparently adopted as a result of the shift to a linear examination system. Whilst some teachers welcomed the move to a linear system as it would mean fewer external exams, most teachers were not happy about this development, which may have been picked up on by students, contributing to their displeasure at the arrangement. With students examined at the end of their two-year course, teachers of some subjects had decided that it was preferable for students to be concurrently taught content from different topics – for example, in sociology, students simultaneously studied "Families and Households*"* with one teacher and "Education" with the other. Whilst this is comparable to the teaching approach used in higher education, this had not been attempted previously at Riverview, and students could be seen as the (unhappy) guinea pigs of this new assessment system and corresponding new approach to organising curriculum delivery. This demonstrates how changes to the assessment system can have a profound impact on teaching and learning.

Interestingly, as well as finding subjects being split between two teachers confusing, many students complained about experiencing confusion between their different A-level subjects – for example, the combination of sociology and psychology was raised by a number of students. This was interesting to me as I would regard these subjects as complementary, and studying them together advantageous, particularly in terms of students developing an understanding of research methods and of some of the key debates within social sciences. Further, this wider and interdisciplinary understanding might have supported students in providing what (as described in the last chapter) one student referred to as the "*flair*" or one's "*own touch*" that is rewarded at A-level. However, this was not a view shared by most students. At GCSE, where students were "taught to the test", they experienced strong "classification" – curriculum contents were "well insulated from each other by strong boundaries" (Bernstein, 2003: 80). As a result of this, rather than seeing wider and interdisciplinary understanding as beneficial, students viewed it instead as a hindrance. Despite one aim of the move to a linear system of examination being to promote holistic thinking (OCR, 2016), students who have been rigorously spoon-fed at GCSE may resist or have difficulty managing this.

Background knowledge

Many teachers at both institutions identified and reported significant gaps in their students' subject knowledge – that which it was expected that they should have acquired at secondary school – and their "background knowledge". Whilst, of course, all students will begin their A-levels with plenty of "background knowledge", what teachers were referring to was knowledge

that formed the backdrop to or was valuable for students' A-levels – what Bernstein characterised as "esoteric" knowledge as opposed to "*commonsense* knowledge" (2003: 90, emphasis original), or what Bourdieu would frame as familiarity with the dominant culture; cultural capital. This background knowledge might have been acquired through school, the home, or through independent learning activities, but was framed as important for student understanding.

Some students also recognised these gaps in their knowledge – for example, Abdullah (Riverview) recognised that in his first attempt at A-levels, studying science subjects, "*I was just struggling to understand everything, and I realised there were so many holes in my knowledge",* whilst Paul (St Bernard's) noted, "*I'm not sure whether it was stuff that we was never taught or whether I'd just forgot but there was a lot [of gaps]."*

This could also affect students studying new, non-national curriculum subjects, such as economics:

"At the start, to be honest with you – I thought that I had decent [understanding] but turned out [laughing], *yeah I didn't actually know very much at all, just like real entry level stuff. Do you know freakonomics? There's a Ted Talk that my cousin showed me. Yeah, it felt like it felt like we went really quickly – like* [dramatic exhale] – *and there was a lot of stuff that we was expected to know."* – Fahim, St Bernard's

When teachers noted that students had gaps in their subject or background knowledge, this was not a complaint about students, but, rather, an observation. However, teachers were fully aware that this made effective teaching and learning lengthier and more difficult, and that, in the context of the large volume of content and limited classroom time available, this represented a challenge.

My fieldnotes contain numerous instances of my finding or teachers reporting that students lacked the background knowledge that we might have expected them to hold. I found many sixth formers to hold only vague understandings of time periods, often expressed in the phrase "back in the day" (used in both oral and written responses), which could refer to the early modern era, Victorian period, the 1960s, or when I was a teenager. I encountered students who had not heard of, for example, the Industrial Revolution, feminism, the Soviet Union, or Margaret Thatcher. One politics teacher complained to me that there were several students in his class who (at least claimed that they) had not heard of Hitler or Nazism. When this was first recounted to me, I had suspected that the students were winding him up, particularly as the Holocaust is a statutory component of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, usually taught in year nine. However, given that most students experienced a shortened Key Stage 3, for many this meaning

only two years of secondary history, it is certainly possible that the Holocaust was missed or rushed through. Further, many students would have, anyway, attended academies, and I have since encountered numerous students who were earnestly oblivious. Ethnicity is implicated here, with World War II drawn on in the construction of White, English identities (Leddy-Owen, 2017) but not necessarily such a central aspect of history for other groups. Describing the difficulties of teaching literature, an English teacher noted its particular complexity, using the example of literary allusions to explain her argument. Understanding literary allusions requires students to draw upon a wealth of background knowledge which they did not necessarily hold, and which could not all be elaborated on within the time constraints of a lesson.

Despite the myth that "you can always look it up" – what Rata (2017) describes as defaulting to the authority of "Dr Google" – this popular for a time in education thinking (Christodoulou, 2014), there are several reasons why background knowledge is important in education. Firstly, background knowledge provides the basis for understanding new knowledge (Willingham, 2009) – background knowledge provides the conceptual hook on to which new knowledge is hung. This is seen in the fact that learners make more errors when background knowledge is weak (Rosenshine, 2012). As described in the previous chapter, students expressed the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount that they needed to learn at A-level, and weak background knowledge is implicated here. Secondly, background knowledge can be seen to precede skill development: Willingham (2009) argues that critical and logical thinking are not possible without background knowledge. Whilst there is greater emphasis at A-level on skills such as evaluation, analysis, and the application of knowledge to unfamiliar contexts, these all require background knowledge. Thirdly, background knowledge improves the memory of material as it makes it more meaningful (ibid) – as seen in the previous chapter, students emphasised the very large volume of material to remember as a key and problematic difference between GCSE and A-level.

Along with students' class (and ethnic) backgrounds, their previous schooling experience is implicated in their lack of the background knowledge that proves valuable to A-levels. As discussed in the previous chapter, most students seemed to have experienced a narrow secondary curriculum and teaching to the test. This limited the range of knowledge that they acquired during their secondary education, disadvantaging them at A-level. Students' cultural capital is likely to be of particular relevance to humanities A-level subjects, although Archer et al. (2015) make the case for the relevance of cultural capital – or, "science capital" – to the sciences as well.

Pedagogy

Lesson structure, teaching style, and the tasks that teachers assigned within class arose frequently in casual conversations with students. I also asked about these topics in interviews as, clearly, the "bread and butter" of what happens in the classroom is hugely important to student engagement and achievement.

Many Riverview students reported regularly experiencing what they perceived to be poorly planned lessons. These did happen at St Bernard's but seemed to be less frequent occurrences. Students' observations relating to poorly planned lessons were supported by internal documents including reports on learning walks (brief, unannounced lesson visits to multiple classrooms) by internal management and external consultants, and by the Ofsted inspection report. Whilst most Riverview students had experienced the occasional seemingly unplanned lesson at GCSE, they reported this as being much more common now they were sixth formers studying for A-levels:

"O*h, I have had some bad experience with science. I come into the lesson, sometimes nothing is planned, and what are we doing? And then it's either recapping of what we've already done or just going on to something like a lesson through a text book. Or sometimes they'll just do one of those – Do you know the pre-planned PowerPoints that you can get off of Boardworks? And then, yes, you weren't really organised for this lesson, were you? And some people just wing it on the spot and they're, okay open up this chapter and we're going to read through the book and I'll explain it to you. Whereas others would have a really thought- out lesson plan. They know what's happening, they know exactly at what time we're going to do what, and when we're moving on*." – Samilaah, Riverview

Evidently, Samilaah felt that A-level lesson time was wasted due to poor planning, and her frustration was palpable. She drew a link between poor planning and teachers' use of particular learning resources. Whilst it is completely reasonable for teachers to use professionally produced learning resources, the quality of such resources varies enormously, and off-the-peg resources cannot be a substitute for planning. Clearly, where the impression of disorganisation had already been created, teacher reliance on a textbook or paid-for PowerPoint presentations serves to further this, likely reducing student trust and confidence, and possibly a student's sense of their teachers caring about their students.

During my interview with Regina, reflecting on the difference between secondary school and college, she claimed, "*Well at GCSE, teachers care way more about you and you doing well in your exams than at A-level.*" I probed a little about how this was expressed, and she acknowledged that some teachers obviously did care about their students' progress:

Regina: *I think Andrew is one of those odd teachers that actually care about you... You can tell because he's one of the teachers that actually prepares the lessons for you and he gives handouts for everything that you need to pass the course. Whereas a lot of teachers don't do that here. They're quite spontaneous with their lessons. They plan in like five minutes before the lesson.*

NL: *Do you think you can always tell that a lesson is unplanned?*

Regina: *You really can.*

NL: *Can you give me some examples?*

Regina: *The teacher really just makes up as he or she goes along. Like he comes up with random tasks, you can tell it isn't planned.*

Here, Regina explicitly links "care" with carefully planned lessons. This clearly led to Regina's perception that, in contrast to Andrew whose lessons were always planned, other teachers did not "care": such perceptions influence students' relationships with teachers, discussed later. The description of teachers making it up as they go along suggests a lack of structure, whilst reference to "random" tasks suggests that assigned activities lacked coherence and were not beneficial to student learning.

Maruan similarly commented on the lack of "structure" in certain lessons:

"*Let's say politics, this year, our [humanities] teacher was good. But the thing is, we didn't get much out of the lessons because it was just a mixture. There was no structure in lessons.*" – Maruan, Riverview

Whilst Maruan recognised that his teacher was knowledgeable and an effective communicator, this did not circumvent the need for lesson planning. The use of the term "mixture" again seems to suggest that the delivery of material or assigned tasks lacked coherence; there was a lack of consideration given to selection and sequencing.

Lejila suggested that poor planning was often evident in teachers' weak explanations, emphasising the importance of considered, clear, and, possibly, lengthier teacher explanation:

"*And then I can also see it as they didn't really put much thought into it, and they didn't realise that it's new to us, so we need a bit more. Do you get what I'm trying to say? You need to understand. What is it? Explain it to us better. We get it, you understand it because you've done your degree, and you've done everything. But then you also have to see it from our point of view, this is completely brand new; we are so alien to this topic*." – Lejila, St Bernard's

Lejila positioned teacher explanation as crucial for students' understanding of new material, and teachers' seeming lack of planning and inability or unwillingness to provide effective explanations had obviously left her feeling exasperated. In addition, she seemed to feel that some teachers were unable to understand the academic challenge that A-levels represented for students, demonstrating a lack of empathy.

Several students commented on how poorly planned lessons contributed to overall poor curriculum delivery:

"I think it is also the way the teachers manage and plan their lessons as well, because there were some lessons where we were on one topic for four weeks before we moved on to another. And on the other one, we were only on it for two days before we moved on, so it was them not managing the topics properly. I feel there was… I guess some teachers don't know what they're doing and others do, in the sense that some teachers don't really have their teaching plans." – Habiba, Riverview

Habiba describes experiencing inconsistent pacing. This suggests either that the scheme of work – the document outlining the intended sequencing and pacing of the curriculum – was poorly structured, or that it was ignored. The possibility that the scheme of work was poorly structured is made much more likely by a new specification and assessment system, with Habiba's year group experiencing the first year of the reformed A-levels. The likelihood of the scheme of work being ignored was increased by the context of high staff absences and teacher turnover, both of which make managing the delivery of the curriculum considerably more challenging. Given the already time-pressured nature of A-levels, this is highly consequential for teaching and learning.

In the absence of students possessing an orientation towards self-regulated learning – or a "scholarly habitus" – students reported that unplanned lessons resulted in unproductive lesson time, with students using the lessons as an opportunity for relaxation and social engagement. Further, students' suspicion that lessons were unplanned could erode their sense of trust in their teacher, diminishing the effort that they were willing to make in the subject more generally:

"If you can't be bothered when it's your literal job – your job *– I'm not [going to be bothered] either*." – Chelsea, St Bernard's

The difference between Riverview and St Bernard's, in terms of sixth formers' perceptions of the extent of lesson planning, may occur in part because of what Bernstein (2003) referred to as the "regulative discourse", which differs between a college and school, a college a more relaxed

environment. It may also be about the motivation and morale of teachers at the time, at this particular institution, and reflect the difference between the quality of teaching in an institution rated as “Outstanding” and one which slipped from “Good” to “Requires Improvement”. It seemed that unprepared lessons were so commonplace that they had become part of the culture – or institutional habitus – of the college, and students may not have expected (or known how to advocate for) better.

Whilst there were some, largely subject-based, variations in students’ pedagogical preferences, there was a (for me, surprisingly) high level of agreement in terms of what students wanted from lessons. For example, students valued teachers making the lesson agenda explicit; recapping from the previous lesson; teacher explanations; use of the whiteboard and PowerPoint (when used appropriately); teachers eliciting students' verbal input and providing feedback/ corrective to it; the use of models and structure for written work; and printed worksheets. Overall, a strong preference emerged for what Bernstein would term strong classification and framing, or “visible pedagogy”: structured, teacher-led lessons with plenty of opportunity for formative assessment.

Samilaah identified Janet, a humanities teacher, as her “best” teacher based on her being a teacher who “*tells us what we need to know”* through *“a whole lecture”*, and her highly organised lesson structure:

“*So, we’d come in, she would have all of the handouts all laid out, so we could just pick all the handouts she put down. And then, just depending on if it’s a brand-new topic or if we’re carrying on from another topic then we’ll have sample questions at the beginning, or a recap of what we’d previously done. And then we’d go through the lessons and everything, and then she’ll have another handout which is like a worksheet, and we fill that in as we go along. And then at the end it’s just a recap of what we’ve learnt, or anything that we didn’t understand, or something that she wants us to go over... Also, we at least try and do one essay plan a day that’s relating to the topic, so then it’s easier when you come to your revision, that you’ve already done all of these essay plans. It’s just putting it around, moving it around. You just think, feeling where the structure is better, and then writing it all out.*” – Samilaah, Riverview

Her account of Janet’s lessons is markedly different from her accounts of those of the teachers who she described as seeming to “*wing it on the spot*”, and, as well as clearly representing more effective teaching, this likely engenders trust and confidence. Whilst students enjoyed this highly organised approach, it should be noted that the approach described – individual lessons planned with accompanying handouts and worksheets – entails a considerable workload: indeed, it is identified in a report of the Independent Teacher Workload Group (2016) as an

approach generating a heavy administrative burden. It is relevant that Janet had been teaching at the college for many years: this had not only given her the time to develop her resources but had also allowed for the development of good relationships with administrative staff who would do her photocopying and printing for her, a task outside of their formal responsibilities and a privilege not granted to most teachers.

When asked what made for good teaching, many students emphasised planning and structure:

"Structure, I think, in terms of lesson plans. In terms of, at the beginning of the year, letting your students know, okay, this term, we're going to be going over mainly this kind of stuff. I think, also, exam techniques. At least one lesson a week prepping on that kind of stuff, because with that kind of stuff, it's like practise makes perfect. So, until it's second nature, you just have to keep going over it. You can go over the content as much as you want, but if you don't know how to apply it, there's no point, kind of thing." – Zeynep, Riverview

"It's good where they tell you right at the outset what the different bits are and you can see as you're going through where you are – not all teachers do that. And then it's about like a mix of proper teaching, writing notes, and then doing questions. In maths we use those little whiteboards so everyone holds up their answer and Catherine can check – that's good, or doing tests. And then you need to go back over stuff – there's so much content that you need to be able to go back over at the end otherwise – yeah, I think planning it so you can go back over stuff before exams." – Ibrahim, Riverview

These comments suggest the importance of teachers communicating the intended sequencing of curriculum delivery, and the value of significant practise and preparation for assessment throughout – assessment and feedback is discussed later in the chapter.

However, whilst students expressed preference for what might be characterised, variously, as strong framing, visible pedagogy, or traditional teaching methods, students were very clear that they did not appreciate being "talked at":

"*But if a teacher's just talking at you talking at you and you're not really getting anything – yeah I don't really like it when you're just being talked [at]*." – Jamila, Riverview

"*If they're just talking, talking – like just droning on I just – I stop listening. I just can't even. Particularly in [humanities] I really – I don't even know what they're talking about, it's so far – it just becomes bla bla bla*..." – Katie, St Bernard's

It seemed that Katie had difficulty accessing the curriculum in this subject, and the combination of the abstract material and the teacher's delivery meant that she tuned out.

One fairly common complaint was about teachers reading directly from their PowerPoint slides or from the textbook:

"*So the teacher was just reading the PowerPoint slides, and the lessons just became really boring. It wasn't the content was boring. It was the teacher was just reading the stuff that was on the slides… You could tell that he just didn't care*." – Abdullah, Riverview

"*But it's when there's a teacher who's just reading through a text book, or is just reading through a board. It's like you don't really care, and you don't really want to be here. You're just being here for the sake of being here and like talking at us... I think they have to be passionate about what they're teaching. If you're not passionate about it we won't be. We can easily tell if they're not interested and then, like, I'm just going to sit and draw*." – Natalie, St Bernard's

One of the reasons why students resented teachers reading directly from textbooks or slides was because they felt that it indicated that the teacher was ill-prepared: understandably, they wanted teachers who were prepared for the lesson and knowledgeable about the topic that they were teaching. Further, many students described valuing teachers who were "passionate" about their subject and teaching, and this kind of delivery suggested the opposite; which, as suggested by Natalie, could be implicated in student disengagement. However, students wanting teachers to be talking *to* them rather than *at* them seemed also to be about wanting teachers to be responsive to students and their learning: they wanted it to matter to their teacher that they were following and that they understood. This kind of responsiveness to students' needs is suggestive of weaker framing, and a number of students expressed preference for what can be characterised as a "mixed pedagogy", combining elements of strong and weak classification and framing (Morais, 2002).

Jamila, for example, described what she considered to be the most effective teaching as follows:

"*For Sciences, I like more collaborative say –, for example, if the teacher's on the board and asking you a question and engaging you it like makes learning easier because you – because basically it irons out all the flaws in education like in that subject before you actually lag it* [fall behind and underachieve]*. Say if she's going through and asking me a question and she realises that you don't know the topic, she can go back again right there and then and explain it to you properly so that you understand it.*" – Jamila, Riverview

Whilst she liked her teachers to be "*on the board*" – "traditional" teaching from the front, using the whiteboard as an aid – she also valued weaker framing of pacing that was responsive to students' rate of acquisition and understanding.

Alistair (St Bernard's) described his favourite type of lesson as one where "*the teacher teaches*", continuing:

Alistair: *One where you can – when you're thinking a lot about what you're being taught. That's when you can feel like you're learning something. Also, ones where there are lots of debates going on.*

NL: *So, you get to engage with the material and give your own views.*

Alistair: *Yes, exactly. And not just give your own views but have the teacher – where the teacher adds to that.*

A lesson where "*the teacher teaches*" is suggestive of strong framing. However, Alistair also valued discussion and the opportunity for student input, this indicative of weaker framing of the hierarchical rules that govern classroom relations (Morais, 2002).

This weaker hierarchical framing seemed to be valued by many students, with a number emphasising the importance of feeling comfortable and confident enough to ask questions in class:

"*What I like about them* [lessons in a particular subject] *is I can always just – if I don't understand, or like, I'm not sure, I ask. Every lesson, I'm asking questions and she always gives me an answer, and it's like 'ohhh, okay, I get it". That's good I think, cos there's a lot of new information, concepts."* – Tolu, St Bernard's

Tolu contrasted this with another subject where she described regularly feeling completely lost, but unable to ask any questions:

"*Like literally sometimes I'd just be sat there thinking 'what is she talking about?' I literally don't know what these words mean. Like have I missed something? But I'd just sit there."*

Fawzia (Riverview) outlined differences in how teachers responded to student questions, with some welcoming questions whilst others seemingly sought to discourage them:

Fawzia: *My teacher, he's up for it. If you ask questions, he loves it. Ask as many as you want. All he wants is for you to understand it, and that's a good technique for a teacher. And don't get annoyed. They'd sooner us ask a lot of questions.*

NL: *So, you think there are teachers who do get annoyed when students do ask a lot of questions?*

Fawzia: *Yes. There are some teachers who are like, 'did you not hear what I just said to you?' Like, five minutes ago, they'll say something. You don't process everything in your mind at once. So, they'll be like, 'well, did you not just listen what I said at that time? Why did you not listen?' And stuff like that.*

NL: *And then, would you tend not to ask questions?*

Fawzia: *Yes. There are times, I'd be like, I don't want to ask any questions, because it's just going to be, oh, were you not listening? But there are times, I'd be like, I don't care. Let them shout at me. I just need to know what's going on.*

It is of obvious importance for students to be able to ask their teacher questions, and questions may be asked to clarify understanding, further understanding, or to alert their teacher to deficits or errors in understanding. Negative responses to student questions may be because teachers had become accustomed to and weary of inappropriate questions which represented genuinely disruptive interventions: these do of course occur, most frequently when students shout out rather than raising their hands, as requested by most teachers. However, negative responses to student questions may also result from teachers' expectations of the pupil role. Drawing on Becker's classic work (1952) on the "ideal" pupil, Gillborn notes that as well as the official requirements of students, teachers also operate with a series of "less clearly articulated, unofficial requirements concerning the pupil role" (1990: 23) and of what constitutes "appropriate behaviour". Further, evidence suggests that pupils' class and ethnicity may influence teachers' perceptions of their behaviour. Teachers may respond negatively to students' questions because they (incorrectly) interpret them as inappropriate, as rudeness, or as a challenge to authority. As well as meaning that students do not have their questions answered, the kinds of negative interactions that Fawzia describes have obvious consequences for student-teacher relationships, discussed later in the chapter.

In terms of the activities that students reported enjoying least and finding least helpful, there was a fairly widespread consensus regarding the undesirability of what students tended to describe as "group work". Whilst there are many different activities which could legitimately be labelled as group work, for students it seemed to be synonymous with group "research" and "peer-teaching" activities, which seemed to involve weak classification and framing, and limited teacher involvement.

According to students' accounts of "group work", typical assignments would involve several lessons being used for a group research task on a specific element of the specification. During these lessons, students sat in their groups and carried out online research on their assigned topic, usually with one or two classroom laptops per group and, where relevant, a text book. A couple of lessons would then be used for each group to present to the rest of the class using a group-created PowerPoint presentation or a poster as an aid. Their teacher might offer some feedback, often relating to students' presentation skills, and encourage the rest of the class to ask the presenting group questions before the next group took their place:

"*It was the worst nightmare. I hate it. I hate it! Oh my god. Ms Hamilton, she made us peer teach like literally a whole unit. So, she'd make us like three of us or so, she'd make us do a PowerPoint on a section of that unit. And we'd go up and present it, and we were only allowed to write like three words for each thing. So, when they were speaking, we were only allowed to write like one word. And this was a whole unit. No wonder like so many people did badly.*" – Lejila, St Bernard's

A number of students linked these kinds of activities with underachievement within their cohort as students simply did not learn much of the material:

"*I think that with peer teaching, the bit that you're told to learn you learn in such depth, and then what everyone else teaches you, you don't, because they like quickly read the PowerPoint. Most times the people are like mumbling, and you're just like – I'd know my own presentation, but when it came to anyone else's, I'd have like massive chunks missing.... Mr Bradley, one of the things he'd say 'just by taking notes, you only retain like 20% of the information, but doing it like this you retain 99%', which I believe he made up... I feel like all throughout the years, we've been like 'Listen to us, please, we know how we learn', but they'll be like 'No, this is how you learn. Do a poster and you'll get an A*.' Didn't work like that.*" – Chelsea, St Bernard's

Whilst a few students described enjoying lessons where they engaged in "group work", this was often because it did not actually involve much learning or require much cognitive engagement:

"*I like the lessons where we do, you know, like independent work in groups, if we can choose our own groups. We do that quite a bit in business, so I'll work with Pham... Okay, I'll be honest, we don't actually do much work, but it's like, as long as you're kind of talking quietly, you've got a textbook open, laptop on, he's gonna let you get on with it. It's nice to sometimes have those relaxation kind of lessons.*" – Zeynep, Riverview

Zeynep's comment demonstrates that students engaged in "group work" may not actually be on task – indeed, if students have not developed skills of self-regulated learning, this is fairly likely. If they are reasonably strategic about this – they do not attract attention to themselves, and they

have the prop of a textbook – they may well get away with very little academic labour whilst providing the impression of productive engagement.

Whilst independent research and presentation skills are undoubtedly important, if we are to take these students at their word, teachers abdicated the responsibility for teaching considerable components of the specification: students' independent research and peer-teaching replaced rather than supplemented teacher instruction. This constitutes subject and pedagogy "experts" passing responsibility to those who are "novices". Further, whilst some have characterised today's teenagers (and, indeed, teenagers as far back as my own cohort) as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) who are adept at using information technology to learn independently, both the research evidence (see Kirschner and van Merrienboer, 2013) and personal experience suggests that this is something of a myth. Many of the young people I have worked with seemed to find it very difficult to extract information from the internet, using it almost exclusively for social media and entertainment. Further, web-based independent research assignments as a replacement for teacher instruction may serve to exacerbate inequalities within the classroom. Whilst most students have access to and are frequent users of digital technology, there are socio-economic differences in *how* people use the internet (Robinson, 2009; Halford and Savage, 2010), and students' "digital literacy" is linked to social class (Darvin, 2018): there is now a "digital dimension" to cultural capital (Danielssen, 2011; Paino and Renzulli, 2012).

Teachers provided a range of justifications for group work. However, some students were sceptical about these:

"I think all the other things that we'd do, it was just so like teachers could tick a box saying 'oh, we did this sort of group activity', even though we would sit there and be like 'we're not learning, please *just give us notes.'"* – Natalie, St Bernard's

Natalie is probably right to suspect this given the past Ofsted preference for "independent learning" and certain kinds of classroom activities (Christodoulu, 2014; Peal, 2014) and the way in which the inspection regime influences the work of a school through what Perryman et al. (2018) describe as "panoptic performativity". Others interpreted the assignment of these kinds of activities as laziness on the part of teachers – who often told students that their resistance to such activities was because of *their* laziness and their reliance on "spoon-feeding".

Overall, generally students preferred and felt that they benefited from more "visible" compared to less visible pedagogy. The specific visible pedagogical practices that many students described align closely with what educationalists have described as direct instruction. Kirschner et al. (2016) define direct instruction as "providing information that fully explains the concepts and

procedures that students are required to learn as well as learning strategy support that is compatible with human cognitive architecture." (75). Some of the principles of direct instruction outlined by Rosenshine (2010) include many of the techniques emphasised by students as beneficial to them, including beginning a lesson with a short review of previous learning; presenting new material in small steps; providing clear and detailed instructions and explanations; asking a large number of questions; checking for understanding; and requiring and monitoring independent practice. The principles of direct instruction suggest what Bernstein would describe as strong instructional framing.

There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of direct instruction (Kirschner et al., 2006; Hattie, 2009; Coe et al., 2014). Kirschner et al. (2006) argue direct instruction is considerably more effective and efficient than what they describe as "minimally guided instruction" – including assigning students to carry out their own "research" – and this is clearly a sentiment shared by many students. Unsurprisingly, students often deeply resented having to engage in activities that they not only identified as unhelpful in terms of their learning but which were actually replacing their being taught. Such minimally guided approaches may rely on that which has not been taught: students' background knowledge (Christodoulou, 2014), or cultural capital.

Many students demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of pedagogical practices, and had a high degree of insight into how they best learnt within the classroom. Students wanted well-planned, relatively strongly framed lessons that were responsive to their needs. This is characterised by some Bernsteinian scholars as a "mixed pedagogy", and it is posited that this is particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students (Morais, 2002; Barrett, 2017). As discussed in the previous chapter, a major difference between GCSEs and A-levels identified by St Bernard's and Riverview students was that teaching and learning at GCSE had been characterised by "spoon-feeding", the term employed by students to describe "teaching to the test" and extensive time dedicated to rehearsal and exam practice within the classroom. Students' accounts of teaching and learning at A-level demonstrate that they were often required to move quickly through the curriculum in order to cover the syllabus content. At the same time, they often experienced poorly planned lessons where little consideration had been given to selection or sequencing, inconsistent pacing, and were assigned classroom activities that they regarded as ineffective, including group work and peer-teaching. This has obvious implications for these students' A-level engagement and achievement.

Assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback take multiple forms: they can be oral or written; formal or informal; formative or summative. The delivery of feedback can be immediate, or delayed; and can be aimed at past or expected future performance, as is the case when teachers provide predicted grades. A further distinction can be drawn regarding the subject of the assessment and feedback: they can relate to students' work or to the individual. Formative assessment has the potential to influence engagement, autonomy, and motivation (Ecclestone and Pryor, 2003), and can have a powerful influence on achievement (Hattie, 2009; Francis, 2021). However, it can also prove *de*formative (Torrance, 2012), and can influence student-teacher relationships, discussed in the next section. Depending on perspective, A-level students at both St Bernard's and Riverview were subjected to or had plenty of opportunities for different forms of assessment.

At both St Bernard's and Riverview, minimum standards for assessment were set out in teaching and learning policies, with the expectation that students completed a certain number of written assessments that resembled the externally examined summative assessments. At both sixth forms teachers were meant to enter marks for these assessments onto the respective learning management systems, theoretically allowing tutors and HODs to monitor student progress. However, data entry was somewhat patchy, and marks were often hurriedly entered immediately prior to termly reports being run – something which would be unthinkable in many secondary schools. Students described significant differences in teachers' provision of feedback, including whether they used a feedback proforma, whether they provided qualitative feedback in the form of written comments, and whether they "graded" work. The form feedback took was partly subject dependent but was also seemingly influenced by teachers' habits and preferences.

Whilst the purpose of teacher assessment should be to support learning as opposed to just measuring its outcomes (Black and Wiliam, 1998), many teachers at both St Bernard's and Riverview complained that students did not pay attention to feedback, thus making teachers' heavy marking workload, if not pointless, then something of a waste of time. However, this did not appear to be true as students discussed both assessment and what can broadly be characterised as teacher feedback at length in interviews as well as raising the topic in many casual conversations. Teacher feedback on students' class contributions and academic work clearly *is* of importance in both academic and interpersonal terms, even if students did not always make use of feedback in the ways teachers expected. What teachers interpreted as students ignoring feedback may have been an outcome of feedback not being explicit enough, or, for example, students wanting to show minimal response to or feeling upset over a poor

grade. Several students had positive accounts of assessment and teacher feedback serving to increase their motivation and engagement, whilst others described feedback that they found unhelpful at best.

Several students described teachers intervening to offer them feedback to address their perceived underperformance. Alistair is an academically talented student who had been “coasting” at C and D grades in his first year of A-levels. Alistair’s teacher kept him behind briefly after class and provided what can be understood as informal feedback on both Alistair’s attitude and academic potential:

“*Mr Johnson, he gave me a kick up the arse to be honest. He was like ‘you’re smart but you’re too cocky and you’re going to screw up if you don’t start putting the work in’ – like, you’re not* that *smart!*” – Alistair, St Bernard’s

Alistair took this well, and, in retrospect, felt that he had needed this kind of intervention. He did, however, acknowledge that he might have taken it less well if it had been delivered by another teacher: prior relationships are very important to the reception of these kinds of intervention and the reception of feedback more generally.

Natalie described how she significantly improved her performance in one humanities subject (going from E grades to C/B grades) thanks to her teacher’s detailed marking and feedback:

“*She like proper marked my work – not just [marking] codes and a number but proper marked it and showed me what I needed to say. So like some teachers they just use AOs [assessment objectives] so it’s like ‘more AO3’ but Ms Patel, she’d like write in what to say in like – like how to say it so that the examiners will like it. It hadn’t really clicked before but then I was like ‘ohhhh, okay, I get it.*’” – Natalie, St Bernard’s

Natalie’s comments suggest that some teacher feedback requires significant decoding on the part of students – decoding which may require cultural capital.

Other students described teachers providing less than effective feedback, and assessment outcomes and feedback which they found upsetting – indeed, seeking to avoid this upset was one reason why students described not making effort, as will be discussed in the next chapter. A number of students reported assessment that served to measure outcomes rather than support learning, and corresponding feedback:

“*So, if you weren't doing well, they would make sure you knew you weren't doing well as in like, ‘maybe you should drop out the course, maybe you shouldn't be doing this, maybe you're not doing well may –’. Like they'll come with their own assumptions, and it was like ‘Actually, I am trying I just don't know what I'm doing wrong.’*” – Jamila, Riverview (commenting on her previous sixth form)

According to Jamila, the feedback the teachers for this subject provided was wholly negative, and she felt that this was based on “*their own assumptions*”. Later in the interview, she expressed her belief that these “*assumptions*” were likely based on negative perceptions relating to her class, ethnicity, and religion, which made her “*a target*” at the largely white, middle-class sixth form she had attended prior to Riverview. Rather than helping her to understand how she could improve her performance, these teachers focused on emphasising her underachievement and suggested that she should change subjects, suggesting that they may have held fixed mindsets in relation to their students or have held low expectations of this Black, Muslim girl. Recalling how she wished to challenge her teachers’ negative assumptions that she was not “*trying*”, Jamila asserts that she just did not understand what she was “*doing wrong*” – how she was not meeting the evaluative criteria was not made explicit to her. However, despite being a capable and ambitious student, she did not seek additional feedback to try to understand or to help her improve.

Laura expressed obvious frustration with the feedback that she received from one humanities teacher:

“Miss Allen was a horrible teacher. I had her for [humanities] and when she marked my work, she’d give me a ‘U’ and be like ‘it’s too vague’ and I’d say ‘what’s too vague?’, and she’d never tell me why. Just ‘It’s too vague, it’s too vague, it’s too vague.’ And one day she shouted at me, ‘Laura, you’re so stupid, you’re going to fail’ and all that ‘da da da’. She’d never tell you what was wrong with your work and how to improve it, [which would have helped] *but she never did* – Laura, St Bernard’s

Laura’s sense that her teacher resisted telling her in specific terms either what was wrong or how it could be improved had clearly left her feeling hopeless, and she became tearful both in this interview and in several other conversations about her first year of sixth form. She had needed explicit feedback that would allow her to improve her work, but, ironically, her teacher’s feedback was unhelpfully vague. With tears in her eyes and her voice cracking, she recalled this instance of her teacher shouting at her which, if remembered accurately, constitutes unkind and unprofessional behaviour. Even if these were not her teacher’s exact words, the public and possibly harsh feedback served to communicate this message to her – that she was stupid and

she was going to fail (which she did) – and this is how it was remembered. Reay (2017) argues that the shame of being thought stupid is ever present for working-class students, and, unsurprisingly, research has identified public humiliation as one of the most negative student-teacher interactions (Pomeroy, 1999): regardless of her teacher's exact words, Laura still felt their sting.

Assessments returned with minimal written feedback or suggestion as to how it could be improved was considered particularly problematic when teachers returned work with little ceremony and then moved on:

"*What I don't like is when the teacher marks your thing and they just give it to you. They don't go through anything, or they don't bother. They're just like, here, take it. This is your grade... If I've put in the time and the actual effort into the paper, and I don't get a good grade, that's going to upset me, to be honest.*" – Fawzia, Riverview

Whilst I am confident that this was not the message that teachers sought to convey, this was interpreted as showing a lack of respect for students' efforts or, where students received a poor grade, low expectations. Further, such casualness with the delivery of feedback may also serve to actively discourage students from seeking further feedback or support as it communicated that they have moved on. Minimal feedback and its casual delivery could upset students and serve to demotivate them. However, an exchange with a Riverview student suggested to me the possibility that students could be "missing" feedback.

Amma, a student I knew well and was supporting with her personal statement came to my desk: "You just sent me back my thingy!" I explained that I'd made edits using Track Changes and left comments, as I'd outlined in the body of the email, and showed Amma the document on my PC: "Ohhhhhhhh". It transpired that Amma had looked at the email attachment on her phone, where none of my changes and comments were visible. This sparked a realisation: could this be why she never saw her English teacher's supposed feedback? "Why didn't you ask where it was?" I asked. With a shrug, Amma responded, "I dunno".

To me, this episode demonstrated the possibility that sometimes teachers *were* providing proper feedback but students were not necessarily accessing this or following up with their teachers as to the perceived lack of feedback. This both demonstrates how there may be a gap between teachers' expectations and the reality of students' technology usage and proficiency and students' possible reluctance to follow up with or confront teachers about issues relating to feedback.

As noted above, assessment outcomes may prove upsetting to students. In my interview with Zeynep, I asked her about the impact of consistently receiving Ds and Es, grades far below what she had been accustomed to achieving (to her mind, relatively effortlessly) at GCSE, and if she sought to use feedback to improve her work:

"*I felt awful. You feel really bad. You're like, I should be doing better, but like also, you're not doing anything to make it better? … I knew that there were ways for me to get better, but I wasn't in the place, mentally. I think at one point, I had really bad depression. Looking back on it, it was definitely depression. But at the time, I just thought I was like overly emotional. This is like a really weird story, but you know those small buses that go up side roads? I was on one of those and I got off too early. It's a ten-minute extra walk. And any other day, I'd have been like, oh, it's fine. But on that day, I just cried the entire journey home for no reason. Looking back on it, I was like, why was I crying? You pent it up. Like lack of confidence, like stress, like overwhelming, responsibility. Everything stacks, stacks, stacks, and then it's like you cry at the worst times. So, I was like, it's something so stupid to cry about, but it really got to me. Looking back on it, thinking what I was thinking at the time, I was saying stuff like, oh, how fucking stupid. How can I get off too early? It's like, it's a bus. But at that point, it was the worst thing to happen to me. I was like, I'm so fucking stupid. Like how like – and then, one thing led to another and I was like, this is why you're failing at A levels. And like that kind of overgeneralisation. That exaggeration. I wasn't in a place mentally to be aware of it, I think... Like AS was awful for me in terms of like mentally. I was in a really bad place."* – Zeynep, Riverview

This upsetting account demonstrates how assessment may shape young people's learner identities (Reay and Wiliam, 1999) and how receiving consistently poor grades in assessments can impact a young person's mental health and self-esteem. The anecdote about a significant overreaction to a fairly mundane event demonstrates how Zeynep's damaged learner identity – her (new) belief that she was "*fucking stupid*" – was both shaping her interpretations of herself beyond education and serving as an explanation as to why she was "*failing at A-levels*". According to Zeynep, her poor mental health left her in a state of inertia. This then made the prospect of seeking support or help from her teachers or pastoral staff seem even more daunting; Zeynep continued to receive poor grades and struggled on alone. Students' mental health is discussed further in the next chapter.

As previously noted, a key aim of assessment and feedback ought to be to support learning. There are a number of reasons why assessment and feedback did *not* necessarily support learning for students at St Bernard's and Riverview. Firstly, according to students' accounts, teachers were not necessarily providing effective feedback. This may be explained by workload pressures, but may also demonstrate teachers possessing fixed mindsets in relation to their

students. Secondly, both the interpretation (or "decoding") and use of feedback may be influenced by students' cultural capital – research has found that working-class students are less likely to ask their teachers for help and more likely to express discomfort when they do seek help (Calarco, 2011; Lareau, 2015). Whilst many schools make reference to wanting their students to be "proactive learners" or to "respond positively to feedback" (a component of Riverview's Behaviour and Attitudes Policy), students do not necessarily know what this means. Where students may have experienced having their questions dismissed or feel that they have been the victim of "assumptions", they may feel a particular lack of confidence in terms of seeking support. Thirdly, students' interpretation and use of feedback may also be related to "mindset" (Dweck, 2006). Dann (2014) suggests that where students have a "fixed" mindset, feedback tends to be interpreted in a way that either confirms or refutes students' fixed views of themselves as learners. This may mean that the outcomes of assessment and feedback are taken personally as opposed to being seen as offering the opportunity for improvement. As a consequence of feedback quality, students' social class, and student learning dispositions, students may not fully benefit from assessment and feedback.

Student-teacher relationships

Student-teacher relationships are of great importance, with the potential to influence students' academic engagement and achievement as well as other outcomes, including, for example, students' social and emotional development.

Most students had experienced very positive relationships with at least one teacher, and all could describe the qualities that made for a "good teacher". These overlapped with the qualities they described in named teachers that they identified as "favourite" teachers. The importance of relationships with teachers was recognised by most students, and some felt that these relationships had taken on greater importance during sixth form:

"*Now I've come to Riverview, that's very important, because if you have any problems or anything, you just go to your teacher and just ask them for help, or anything. Whereas, if you don't build a friendship with your teacher, it's just you guys are completely strangers, and they just teach you, and you just leave the classroom*." – Fawzia, Riverview

Such "friendship" was seen as valuable in terms of accessing additional academic and, potentially, pastoral support, as well as enhancing access to enrichment opportunities, particularly those for which there were limited spaces.

The positive teacher characteristics identified by students related to both pedagogy and personal qualities, although these did overlap, with, for example, well-planned lessons interpreted as an expression of care. Personal qualities referred to by students included kindness, fairness, and patience. Many students mentioned appreciating teachers who both showed positive belief in them and offered support:

"*He's an amazing guy. First, he let me onto the course when Brandon had said no and then he always, he'd always come to me and be like 'Come on Dawit, you can do it'. He'd always say to us, 'come and see me, bring your problem set'. Like there's not an excuse for not doing homework because he'll sit down with you and help.*" – Dawit, Riverview

Such positive belief and support are particularly important for students who may lack confidence in their abilities, and several students positioned a teacher's expressions of belief and support at crucial to their motivation.

Whilst there was widespread agreement on the positive characteristics of teachers, students expressed different preferences in terms of the level of formality adopted by A-level teachers. Most students agreed that, on the whole, teachers adopted a more informal approach than they had experienced during Key Stage 4 – in Bernsteinian terms, there was weaker hierarchical framing within the classroom. This was expressed by teachers treating students in a more "adult" fashion, at least some of the time, and being prepared to "have a laugh" with students, and students largely enjoyed this less formal approach. However, several students mentioned teachers who they felt went too far in this informality, revealing too much of themselves.

Some students reported some teachers chatting to them about their personal lives:

"*She just always used to come in and talk about like her horse riding lessons and like her swimming and tell us about her fiancé, and she was like 'Oh I went to Paris for the weekend.' It was just like she was too personal I think, she used to tell me about her life, and I didn't really care*." – Amy, Riverview (commenting on her previous college)

Given that earlier in the interview Amy had described the use of "*little stories*" during teaching as an indicator of a teacher being passionate about their subject, it may well be that there was a class and racial dynamic to her complaint here, with Amy describing this particular teacher as "*posh*" and, later in the interview, as a "*Becky*" – what I believed to be a pejorative term for young Jewish women but which Amy clarified was a pejorative term for a certain kind of White woman. This demonstrates the importance of the student-teacher relationship to students' observations about their teachers, which were not necessarily always objective or fair.

Whilst students generally reported liking teachers who were friendly and could be relatively informal, they resented what they interpreted as overfamiliarity and teachers who talked too much about their lives. This seemed to diminish the respect that students had for a teacher, and they recognised that lengthy anecdotes were not the best use of lesson time, and possibly an attempt to distract from a poorly planned lesson.

In terms of the negative characteristics identified in teachers, again, there was often an overlap between pedagogy and more personal qualities. Students resented teachers who they felt contributed minimal effort in terms of lesson preparation and assessment, or who they felt did not really care about them, and did not offer much support. As discussed earlier, many students felt that this was more common now that they were studying for A-levels.

Several students also mentioned teachers who they perceived to particularly dislike them:

"*I really hated my [sciences] teacher. She had a grudge against me, 100%. Again, laziness. When I say she had a grudge, I was really annoying in her lessons. I was aware of it at the time, as well. We had tables of four, so two and two. It's like if we were talking on our table, she would literally be like, 'Zeynep, be quiet'. And everyone would look… At the beginning of the year, when I was trying to say this, she's picking on me, everyone's like, 'you're just exaggerating'… But, then when it came to April, everyone's like, 'yeah, she picks on you, she picks on you'. I was like, thank you*." – Zeynep, Riverview (commenting on her previous college)

"*Honestly, she hated me! It was because I'd say 'we're not learning, this is stupid' because I knew that it* [group work and peer teaching] *was stupid – like why do I want to hear what Anthony* [a student in the class] *has to say?! But then I think she was a real bitch if I'm honest.*" – Chelsea, St Bernard's

Whilst Zeynep and Chelsea recognised that there were reasons behind their respective teachers' supposed dislike of them – laziness and chatting, and challenging the teacher – both still felt that they were treated unfairly. I thought that gender was likely implicated here, with teachers expecting more interruptions and challenge from male pupils (Francis, 2000). Whilst boys can be positioned as "loveable rogues", similar behaviour by girls tends to be interpreted differently (Jackson, 2006b).

Linked with perceptions of unfair treatment, many students also felt that certain teachers had low expectations of them or belittled them:

"*She would put you down easily say like, if you weren't achieving the level that she was requiring you to achieve* [the ALPS minimum expected grade]*, she would put you down and you feel like less or it will be like she would do she would do it unintentionally as well. So, she would favour students*

who were doing much better academically and so when I saw that I was like this is I felt like it was because of me." – Jamila, Riverview (commenting on her previous sixth form)

By stating "*she would do it unintentionally as well*", Jamila seemed to feel that this teacher *intentionally* "put down" those students who she regarded as underachieving, making them "*feel like less*". As noted earlier, Jamila suspected that she was targeted based on her ethnicity.

Ibrahim (Riverview) complained about an *"arrogant"* teacher at his previous sixth form who, he claimed, tried to show him up in lessons to *"undermine"* him in front of his peers.

Tara described at length her many complaints against a particular arts teacher. She saw this teacher as underestimating her abilities, deliberately cool with Tara, and underhand:

"*I knew I was better at [arts] than what she was saying. She didn't like me and she didn't want me to be good. She'd be like all nice, all friendly with the others in my class. So, basically, I started to ignore her back, that's all... And then she went to my form tutor!*" – Tara, St Bernard's

The situation between Tara and her arts teacher deteriorated to the point that Tara dropped the subject midway through year 12 – as an arts subject with coursework, she was concerned that her teacher's seeming dislike of her would influence her grade. Reflecting on the experience, which she was still angry about, Tara expressed her view that race had played a role – she is Black and the teacher was White. However, she was aware that she could not substantiate this, and noted that there were other Black students in the class.

Amongst my interviewees (although this was not noticeable in my informal conversations), students were rather more likely to make direct and specific complaints against a teacher of the same sex as them, as is reflected in the examples above. However, students were also rather more likely to identify their "favourite ever" teacher as one of the same sex as them. This suggests that may be an important gender dynamic in student-teacher relationships.

Several other students made accusations against teachers of racism, sexism (sometimes in the form of a male teacher being "pervy"), and what students saw as unprofessional behaviour. Whilst I regularly heard accusations of racism against teachers, students rarely explained their justification for such claims or offered actual examples of racist behaviours – it might be that students had difficulty articulating what might have constituted micro-aggressions, or it may be that accusations of racism can serve as a general expression of students' dissatisfaction about their treatment by a particular teacher (Archer et al., 2010). Students were much more likely to claim that they had been targeted by teacher racism earlier on in their secondary school careers. This may be because of the different treatment of younger pupils, who are much more likely to receive what Kulz (2017) describes as the "verbal cane", which might single out a student within

a group in a way that a student interprets as discriminatory. Unsurprisingly, there was a relationship between students' claims of discriminatory or unprofessional language and behaviour and difficult relationships with teachers. However, it is difficult to say whether such behaviour was the cause of tensions, as students may be more likely to find fault with or misinterpret the comments of a teacher that they already dislike.

Along with students feeling that a particular teacher disliked them, there were many instances of relationships with teachers fraying or breaking down recorded in my fieldnotes. Gay (1981) argues that conflict between teachers and students in diverse school settings results from mismatched goals, behavioural patterns, cultural codes and values, and background experiences. Relationships frayed for a wide range of reasons, including feedback and predicted grades, and either student or teacher interpretations of communication or behaviour.

UCAS predicted grades were a frequent source of student-teacher conflict. This may, in part, be based on students' and teachers' different understanding of predicted grades: students tend to see predicted grades as an expression of what they *could* achieve, whereas teachers tend to see them as what they *expect* students to achieve, based on evidence (i.e., students' actual performance in assessments). Whilst predicted grades are based on evidence, many (but not all) students are aware that they remain somewhat open to negotiation: students will seek to plead their case, and often teachers will provide students with the opportunity to "prove" that they deserve a higher predicted grade, either on an individual or class-group basis.

In order to successfully negotiate with their teachers, students must know that such negotiations are possible and permitted and understand how to approach these in a way that will be deemed appropriate. Students' ability to successfully negotiate with their teachers is dependent on their existing relationships, cultural capital, and (potentially racialised) habitus. Some students also seek to involve their parents, though this is not a strategy available to all, and the likelihood of this bringing success seems dependent on parental cultural capital. The negotiated nature of predicted grades provides the potential for protracted discussions, which increases the potential for conflict. Whilst students' understanding of the UCAS process and higher education landscape is variable, many recognise the critical importance of their predicted grades. Thus, students may feel outrage where predicted grades are below what they themselves believe (or hope) that they will achieve, or what they anticipate requiring in order to receive serious consideration as an applicant. Where predicted grades do result in conflict, this occurs at a critical time in students' A-level studies and may serve to damage student motivation and engagement. The response of Akuba, a Black African year 13 student at Riverview whose humanities teacher predicted her a B rather than the A that she wanted is a case in point: whilst she had at one point aspired to attend an elite Russell Group institution, her lengthy and

eventually unsuccessful tussle with her (White) humanities teacher over her predicted grade culminated in her telling me, "I don't even care if I fail [humanities], really I don't". She later withdrew her UCAS application and, seemingly, largely withdrew from attending this teacher's classes.

Many of my most illuminating exchanges with students took place in the Garden Room, a small room accessed through the scruffy college "garden" which students could use for private study during free periods. In the following vignette, we see how a routine and unremarkable exchange between a student and their teacher, in which the teacher enquires after and holds the student to account for missing work, is seemingly interpreted by the student as amounting to hostile behaviour.

Towards the end of morning break, Chantelle and Dina, two Black year 12 students, burst into the Garden Room talking agitatedly and making no effort to adjust their volume. "Indoor voices, girls", I enjoined them. Chantelle apologised: "Sorry Miss, I'm just pissed off." I asked what was wrong. "Teeeachers! I'm telling you, I'm pissed off!" It transpired that Chantelle had been involved in an exchange with one of her teachers, Janet, over missing work. I found Chantelle's breakneck-speed description of events somewhat difficult to follow, but the crux of the issue appeared to be Janet's alleged belief that the subject she taught was "the most important thing in the world. Eh, she can be so rude! Pisses me off, man."

When I pressed Chantelle on Janet's apparent rudeness, it became clear that, as they both came out of different classrooms, Janet had approached her in the hallway to enquire after a missing Key Assessment (KA). Chantelle had claimed that she had left the work in Janet's pigeon hole, and Janet had challenged her on the truthfulness of this – "She called me a liar!" Chantelle acknowledged that Janet was right to believe that she had not told her the truth but explained that this was because "she never listens!" I suggested that the moderate and clearly well-intentioned verbal rebuke imparted by Janet was evidence of the fact that she cared; that she wanted Chantelle to do well in her subject. Chantelle raised her voice again, now shouting: "I don't want her care! She should mind her own business, man". Kissing her teeth, she turned away from me, forcefully sat down, and put her headphones in her ears.

I was struck by this exchange for a number of reasons: the teacher involved, the different understandings of appropriate behaviour versus "rude" behaviour, and the different views regarding the student and the teacher role and responsibilities. Janet is a well-respected White, middle-aged humanities teacher, referred to in the pedagogy section in relation to her well-planned and structured lessons, and described to me by one student as "like a cute grandma", this reflective of Janet's kindly and somewhat maternal approach. Chantelle had clearly taken

significant offence at Janet's behaviour. This seemed to relate to a number of Janet's actions: apprehending Chantelle in the hallway – a neutral space that did not "belong" to Janet; persisting with the encounter when Chantelle had attempted to end it by claiming that she had, in fact, handed in the work; and accusing Chantelle of lying (even though she was). As opposed to recognising Janet's view that she "owed" work, Chantelle felt that she should be able to submit work as and when was convenient for her. Rather than seeing Janet as a committed teacher dedicated to her students' progress, Chantelle regarded Janet as intrusive and meddlesome: in contrast to the students who felt that their A-level teachers didn't care enough about them, Janet cared too much. Chantelle seemed indignant, affronted, and, potentially having lost face in front of her peers, possibly embarrassed, and this had fermented into anger not just at Janet, but, seemingly, teachers more generally.

There are many further instances in my fieldnotes of students' views of the student/ teacher role being at odds with those of the institution or teachers themselves. One way in which this was expressed was via the insult "eeyop", which I first heard from two year 13 girls expressing dissatisfaction with their humanities teacher. When I asked what this unfamiliar phrase meant, they explained that "eeyop" (actually the acronym EOP) stood for "enemy of progress": they felt that their humanities teacher, by having escalated his concerns about their patchy attendance and KA submission, was potentially impeding their progress. Another year 13 student, Kimya, did not understand her teacher being angry with her when she had reappeared after many missed lessons, noting "he should be pleased I'm back". That her teacher had escalated the issue to the HOD made him an EOP: many students seemed to understand disciplinary action commenced by their teachers as targeted discrimination, even if rules were evenly applied to all students (though this was not always the case). The term was also frequently applied to teachers who resisted students' efforts to negotiate their UCAS predicted grades upwards.

The research evidence and students' accounts suggest that class, ethnicity, and gender may play a role in student-teacher relationships. When conflict arises or relationships between students and teachers break down during sixth form, this can be more damaging than these relationships deteriorating earlier in students' academic careers for two main reasons. Firstly, in sixth form, lesson attendance is perceived as more "optional" than in earlier schooling stages where students *have* to be in or accounted for. Where student-teacher relationships have become strained, students may opt to miss these lessons – student attendance is discussed in the next chapter. Secondly, individual student-teacher relationships arguably gain importance at A-level: in year 11, students might be taught by more than a dozen teachers; depending on how subjects are split, at A-level they may have only three teachers. This means that a strained relationship with any individual subject teacher can have a serious impact.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illuminate students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, and has discussed issues "inside the classroom" – teaching and learning issues that may have impacted upon students' engagement and achievement at A-level. As in the previous chapter on the differences between GCSE and A-level, it should be noted that these issues are not discrete, but, rather, interact: as observed by Henry, "the delivery of relatively poor or unconvincing curricular content and perceived bad classroom praxis become inextricably linked in the mind of the student" (Henry, 2021: 567). This is clearly also true of other issues discussed within the chapter – for example, teacher pedagogy influenced student-teacher relationships, whilst student-teacher relationships could influence how students responded to feedback.

Most students had both praise for and complaints about teachers and teaching. Students attending Riverview were more likely to experience a range of problems, including teacher absences and turnover and poorly planned lessons, which may have become part of the institutional habitus of the college. As discussed in Chapter 4, Riverview had low A-level entry requirements and welcomed transfer students to progress with low grades, or resit. Therefore, Riverview's A-level students were largely those who attained less highly at GCSE or did not attain in their first attempt at A-level. These students both contribute to and are shaped by the institutional habitus of the college. Whilst these students arguably need the *most* support, they were less likely to receive the support that they needed at Riverview.

Whilst many students had legitimate grievances about teaching, throughout the different issues explored in this chapter, we see the salience of students' cultural capital. For example, students' cultural capital potentially shaped their interpretations of curriculum, their ability to make sense of new material, and their responses to feedback. This suggests that even in an institution with "perfect" teaching (this, of course, highly subjective), these students would still be likely to experience some difficulties in their A-levels. In far from perfect institutions, these difficulties were pronounced.

This chapter has discussed students' experiences of teaching and learning "inside" (or just beyond) the classroom. The following chapter will consider the freedom and responsibility of sixth form.

Chapter 7: The freedom and responsibility of sixth form

Bernstein (2003a) argued that all schools operate with two discourses: a regulative and an instructional discourse. The regulative discourse incorporates the social order of the school. Sixth form is generally conceptualised as offering a more "relaxed" social order, and many students and teachers talked about sixth form offering students greater "freedom". The greater "freedom" of sixth form was something almost all St Bernard's year 12 students identified as something they were looking forward to when I carried out "snapshot" interviews at the start of the academic year and was raised by all of my interviewees at both St Bernard's and Riverview. This enhanced freedom was characterised primarily by the removal of uniform, having free periods added to their schedule, and, for a number of students, freedom from their most hated subjects (PE mentioned in this respect by several female students). However, both St Bernard's and Riverview emphasised that this "freedom" (which, in some respects, proved somewhat illusory) was accompanied by students needing to take far greater responsibility for their own learning.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first, I will discuss the greater "freedom" of sixth form, considering dress code, free periods, and student attendance. Part II will discuss the responsibility of sixth form: how students managed their responsibility for their own learning and approached independent work. Many students had long looked forward to the greater freedom offered by sixth form. However, many identified this freedom as ultimately having had quite negative consequences for their educational engagement and achievement.

Part I: The "freedom" of sixth form

Dress code

Many students recounted having longed for the day that they would leave their school uniforms behind, describing the opportunity to wear their own clothes as one of the aspects of sixth form that they had most looked forward to. However, dress code rules proved to be a source of major tension between staff and students at St Bernard's, and, as well as observing many negative interactions around uniform, the topic was raised by all of my interviewees. Whilst Riverview did not have a dress code, in the course of discussing their secondary school experiences in interviews, many students at Riverview spontaneously raised their school's uniform rules as a source of aggravation. Indeed, some students suggested that uniform policy was implicated in their disengagement from school or in negative relationships with teachers and wider staff. St Bernard's sixth form dress code policy from the period of fieldwork is reproduced below.

What to wear

St Bernard's Sixth Form Centre adopts a **"Young Professional"** dress code. In other words, we have based these guidelines on how a professional person would dress for work. This means students will be smart, well-presented and businesslike.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">For All Students: Identity card must be on display.</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>For the Female Student
What is acceptable:
• Trouser suit (navy, grey, brown or black)
• Skirt suit (navy, grey, brown or black)
• Dress suit (navy, grey, brown or black)
• Blouses or shirts (long or short sleeves)
• Plain V-neck jumpers or cardigans
• Coat
• Sensible shoes
• Headscarf for religious reasons

What is not acceptable:
Anything else not mentioned above</td>
<td>For the Male Student
What is acceptable:
• Suit (navy, grey, brown or black)
• Collared shirts with tie
• Plain V-neck jumpers or cardigans worn over a shirt and tie
• Waistcoat
• Coat
• Sensible shoes – black or dark coloured

What is not acceptable:
Anything else not mentioned above</td>
</tr>
</table>

Where clothing has a logo it will only be permitted where it is discreet and not offensive in nature.

Facial jewellery should be removed or covered up.

Appropriate jewellery may be worn by Sixth Form students, i.e. wrist watch, earring/ ear stud, single necklace, single bracelet.

Earpieces from phones or mp3 players should not be worn around necks or in ears.

Extreme hairstyles are not permitted. For guidance, this includes very short hair, very long hair, coloured hair, shaved patterns.

Tattoos are discouraged in the Sixth Form.

The ultimate decision as to what is/is not acceptable will be made by the Sixth Form Leadership team.

……..

Early on in my fieldwork, knowing that I had previously worked at a sixth form that did not have a dress code, Mr Andrews enquired what I thought about the St Bernard's dress code. Having, during my own time at school, slipped in and out of sixth form in black skinny jeans and a fake fur jacket, in glaring contravention of the dress code, which I had regarded as preposterous, I answered diplomatically that I could see both the pros and cons of a uniform policy. He admitted that the sixth form dress code had changed a number of times over the years, and the

commitment to enforcing it had waxed and waned. But, he sighed, what were they to do? Even *with* the dress code, he was constantly having to tell boys that he did not want to see their boxer shorts and to pull up their trousers. If they *didn't* have a dress code, the boys would dress like "slobs" or "gangsters", and the girls would look completely inappropriate for the classroom. This strongly resonates with Archer et al.'s finding that "working-class pupils' (investments and performances of) embodied appearance and style were positioned (by staff) as 'anti-education', particularly where their appearances were associated with (hyper)heterosexuality and/or black masculinity and criminality" (2007: 230).

Whilst most students recognised the value of some kind of dress code, they resented "extreme" rules or where uniform was treated as more important than, for example, student learning.

In my interview with Fawzia, during our discussion about her experiences of secondary school, she noted that school uniform rules featured significantly in her memories of and feelings about secondary school:

"*Because, we had this rule about a headscarf. You had to tuck your headscarf in your shirt. It's a shirt, so there's no space for you to tuck it in. I think it's more towards you have to look professional, and stuff, because you have to close your blazer, and put your tie on top. Because, we had a crown, and you had to show the crown. Whereas, I don't think that's worth it. It looks weird. They shouldn't do that when it comes to uniform. There should be a uniform to show the person's very professional looking, and stuff, but they shouldn't do very strict rules. It's just going to extremes for no reason. And then they wonder why, oh, why are the students acting like this? Because, you're giving them irrelevant rules, which no-one wants, to be honest. There was a period, I don't know why, but I was a troublemaker. After year nine, year ten, I stopped. I realised it wasn't worth it… The thing is, I was shy, and I was a troublemaker. That's the thing. It was weird. How is it* [the uniform rules] *relevant stuff? Which then triggers the person to get angry.*" – Fawzia, Riverview

This petty rule clearly only affected Muslim girls. This quotation powerfully expresses how "extreme" and "*irrelevant*" rules can alienate a student, to the extent where even a mild-mannered and generally well-behaved student such as Fawzia can come to see herself as a "*troublemaker*" because of minor breaches of uniform regulations and interactions around these.

Such sentiments were echoed by students at St Bernard's, and negative interactions between staff and students around the dress code were a daily occurrence:

Chelsea: *I've been sent home maybe 30 times this year. Okay, not 30; probably 20. I just never listened. I think I wore a suit the first day and then I was like 'never again'. So, getting to the gate they're like 'where's your blazer?', it's always 'where's your blazer?' Someone was sent home because their blazer and their skirt were two different colours. So, if I wasn't sent home, I'd be late for school because I used to have to hide round the corner. So, I'd be late to lessons because I'd have to hide for like 20 to 30 minutes... Emmanuel would walk in the gate in like jeans, Vans and a denim shirt and they'd be like 'your skirt's too short.' Are you stupid? No... So many times I got sent home* [to change] *and I'd be like 'K, bye'. It actually didn't faze me. And they'd call my house, 'Chelsea's not here'. So I'd actually say that it had a massive contribution* [to non-attendance] *as I'd get really angry and be like 'I have shows to catch up on, I'll go home.'.... I'd be sleeping, watch TV.*

NL: *And how did that make you feel towards sixth form leadership?*

Chelsea: *Like I just started ignoring them, no matter what they said I'd be like ''K, bye'. Because like what do they care about? How I look or the grades I get? We almost wasn't allowed in our [AS] exam because of what we were wearing. I had trainers on, Jeremy was wearing casual clothes, Philip didn't have a tie on but he was wearing a suit because he always comes to school in a suit. And he was like 'I can't let you into the exam'. And we was like standing there like "Well we'll run into the hall, you can't stop me.' And he was like 'If it happens again I won't be letting you in, you know the rules.' And I was like, the only reason I'm here is for this damn exam and it was our last one as well, our last exam. So even then* [laughing] *at the crux of everything, our uniform was more important.*

Chelsea clearly felt that there was differential treatment of students in relation to the dress code and that she was treated unfairly. There may have been some truth in this, but I regularly saw Chelsea (and her friends) in flagrant non-observance of the dress code, including on the day of our interview, when she was wearing tightly fitted, lime green, plaid trousers, an oversized t-shirt, and plimsolls. Regardless, Chelsea's sense of being engaged in constant conflict with members of the sixth form leadership team contributed to her poor attendance and what seemed to be a close to permanent sense of irritation. This irritation was visible and frequently remarked upon by the sixth form team in comments, including that Chelsea "has a face on again". Chelsea's annoyance at interactions around her attire was bolstered by her sense that staff had the wrong focus – that they cared more about her appearance than her grades. This

belief that St Bernard's staff prioritised the trivial was shared by a number of other St Bernard's students:

"*I always felt that they should deal with certain people in the school. Because we were the smart ones, they looked to us and thought that we should look a certain way but then the people who were misbehaving, they were like, overlooked… At some points we didn't have textbooks. At A-level there's a lot of content: focus on that.*" – Natalie, St Bernard's

"*They focused in on really stupid stuff like uniform instead of education and trying to further us.* [adopting a silly voice] *'To prepare us for the world of work'. They went to the extremes of measuring skirts... 'Cos I find like, if you wear comfortable clothes it's more easier to learn. But if you're wearing a blazer and a tie* [as had been required for girls the previous year] *you can't move much... But with year 12, I think they're being more laid back because there are girls wearing crop tops. And I'll wear just like leggings*." – Laura, St Bernard's

Not unreasonably, the measuring of skirts hems was regarded as a grotesque intrusion, seemingly designed to humiliate rather than "*trying to further us*". Whilst I never observed any year 12 students wearing crop tops (this may have been hyperbole on Laura's part), I also did not observe any attempts by teachers to measure skirt hems, and there was a general agreement amongst year 13 students (and those, like Laura, who were repeating year 12) that the measures that they had regarded as "*extremes*" had largely been dispensed with. However, even those students who were not persistent offenders like Chelsea could still find themselves being sent home:

"I got sent home because I had trainers on, but I didn't have my shoes 'cos I left them after football. And I told them that I'd pick them up after school, but they still sent me home. That wasn't right. That made me angry… They'd been on my back about attendance and then sent me home cos I'm in trainers! It's hypocritical." – Paul, St Bernard's

Paul was a well-behaved student with a sunny disposition who had good relationships with teachers. This incident seemed to have triggered a sense of injustice: he had only worn trainers because his school shoes were unavailable. Paul played football at a fairly serious level and had missed a number of days of school due to football commitments – this is what had apparently led members of the sixth form team to be "on his back" over attendance. Given this apparent concern over his attendance, Paul felt it was contradictory for him to be sent home over what he saw as a justified (as opposed to rebellious) dress code infraction. Indeed, themes of hypocrisy and injustice characterised many students' accounts of school uniform policy and its enforcement.

It seemed to me that (some) students' resistance to the dress code was shaped by the view that the sixth form leadership cared more about appearances than the quality of teaching and student learning. As noted by Maguire et al., "Regulative discourses on clothing, appearance and comportment are tied into the need to circulate messages about ethos and 'tone'" (2010: 162), with a tightly monitored dress code signalling that the school is orderly and in control – and, therefore, a safe place for parents to send their children. As discussed in Chapter 4, I had noticed this emphasis from right at the start of the academic year, and, as my fieldwork progressed, came to feel that my initial interpretation – that the sixth form emphasis on "professionalism" was because appearances and aesthetics are easier to manage than students' engagement and achievement – was an accurate one. However, this emphasis, particularly in relation to dress code, may have actually served to undermine student engagement and, as a result of students missing lessons due to their clothing, possibly even achievement.

Much research has noted that young people's investment and embodiments of style may influence their relationship with schooling, and this may be classed – Archer et al. (2007) argue that working-class pupils' investments in appearance and style are different to those of middle-class pupils because working-class pupils are likely to have fewer resources from which to generate capital. Whilst many students raised the issue of uniform or dress code, the importance given to it appeared to be gendered: girls were much more likely to position issues around dress as highly important to their feelings about or engagement in school, including in relation to their attendance. This is likely because teenage girls may be more invested in and self-conscious about their appearance (Archer et al., 2010; Crenna-Jennings, 2021). Whilst some students (for example, Chelsea) were engaged in regular, egregious breaches of uniform policy, others did seem to simply want to be comfortable, both in terms of their physical comfort and in relation to their appearance. Their objection to the dress code was less about wanting the freedom to express themselves through their fashion choices and far more about not wanting to be wearing something that they deemed to be particularly unflattering, a frequent complaint about blazers. Students had been promised greater freedom and told that they would be treated like young adults: it was in this context that they resented conflictual exchanges and punishment over what they regarded as irrelevancies.

Free periods

Free periods – spaces in students' timetables – are a feature of just about all state-funded sixth forms, with funding provided for 180 guided learning hours per subject per year. At both St Bernard's and Riverview, students were timetabled nine teaching hours per fortnight per

subject, providing all students with (at least) several free periods per week. However, despite being granted the "freedom" of free periods, students rarely used these to discharge their responsibility of engaging in independent work.

At St Bernard's, despite Mr Andrews' early (and repeated) insistence that free periods were to be used for study, rarely could students be found to be studying in their "frees". The following vignette captures the range of activities that could be found being undertaken in the St Bernard's sixth form study room and provides one student's "justification" for this.

I was sat at a computer in the sixth form mentors' "office" – actually a sectioned-off area made from MDF walls – when Cassie, a year 13 student, tapped me on the shoulder and asked to borrow some headphones. Headphones were kept in the office, to be distributed by a staff member, with strict instructions that they were only to be used for academic purposes. I got up and looked around: "What computer are you sat at?" She pointed to a screen which was open on the distinct BBC iPlayer page: "That one, Miss" I asked what it was she wanted to watch: something educational? She shrugged: "I've finished all my work, Miss."

Not wanting to implicate myself in her television watching, I refused Cassie headphones and suggested that she could read a poem from the A-level anthology – I knew that her copy was barely annotated. "Miiiiiiisssss!" she wailed, in an exasperated, pleading tone, stamping one foot for emphasis, "No one works at school."

I walked slowly round the room, which felt calm but with a steady buzz of activity. As I scanned the room, this steady buzz of activity was quickly revealed to be almost wholly non-academic.

Not a single student sat at a PC was engaged in academic work. Paul was watching football goal score compilations on Youtube. Ali, at the PC next door to Paul, was watching boxing. Raheem and David – sharing a single computer, an activity strongly discouraged by the leadership team – appeared to be on Football Manager. Tara was scrolling through a student job website. Natalie and Chelsea, also sharing a computer, were scrolling through ASOS. Daniel was reclined on his chair at a 45-degree angle to the floor with his eyes closed.

At the centre desks, Jasmine and Shakira were sat next to each other, listening to one headphone each, mouthing along to a song and shimmying their shoulders to the beat. A few desks away from them, Cam was drawing a Manga illustration. Katie and Simarjit were sat next to each other with a sociology textbook between them but were talking rather than working. Fahim had his elbows on the desk, head in his hands, and was staring into space. Tina was painting her nails. Only one student (one of the few high achievers within the sixth form) appeared to be engaged in academic work, completing a problem set.

At this point, I had already spent three years working in a school sixth form; the lack of academic labour taking place was hardly shocking to me. However, it was the first time I had heard a student make the claim that "no one works at school". Whilst it was obviously not true – there was one student completing work a few metres away from Cassie – it certainly was true that students did not seem to engage in much academic work at school outside of lessons (or indeed, according to some students' account, whilst *in* lessons).

For me, this scene is more revealing than the many occasions captured in my fieldnotes when the atmosphere and noise level of the sixth form study room more closely resembled the school's playground. Students understood that they needed to provide the appearance of being engaged in academic work during their free periods – students at the centre desks had out items suggestive of work, seemingly as props, and even the boys watching boxing or playing Football Manager surely had a Word document open behind the sport. Students also understood that they needed to be quiet in order to foster the impression of academic labour: the previous week, Mr Andrews had marched into the study room and bellowed at students about the noise and lack of work, and, since then, students had taken to shushing each other, aware that excess volume or boisterous activity – what Mrs Lovell had referred to as "behaving like animals" – drew the attention of the sixth form leadership team. I regularly heard students make the same claim made by Cassie – *"I've finished all my work"* – on those occasions when staff approached students to ask what they were doing. I knew what subjects Cassie studied, and I also knew that she was on an "Academic Report" to monitor her progress across her subjects: it was simply impossible that she had no work she could do. Rather, I believe what she actually meant (although this was also not necessarily true) was that she had finished work which had been explicitly set by her teachers with an imminent deadline – this was "work", with other academic labour often seen as unnecessary.

That students did not engage in academic work during free periods whilst at school or college may have been because it was seen as "uncool" to work. Students' identities are implicated here, with some students potentially seeing (public) academic work as incompatible with their (classed, gendered, and racialised) identities, and research has identified the "uncool to work" discourse in secondary schools, particularly amongst male students (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). This, combined with the discourse of "effortless achievement" may encourage students to disguise and publicly minimise the academic labour that they are engaged in (Jackson, 2006a). The value placed on "effortless" achievement may specifically disadvantage working-class and some minority ethnic groups because it is easier for those students with greater access to resources to provide the impression of effortless achievement (Jackson and Nyström, 2015): where effort is maligned, students may not wish to work publicly but are less likely to have the

appropriate space or resources at home. Further, the obscuring of the academic labour required to achieve highly may mean that some lower and moderate achievers do not understand the effort that high achievement requires and may develop false beliefs about *who* can achieve highly and *how* this is accomplished – achievement may be "misrecognised" – reinforcing inequalities. If few students publicly engage in academic work, this becomes part of the institutional habitus of the sixth form. However, it could also be indicative of students' propensity to engage in independent academic work more generally, a propensity that, from my interactions with students, and teachers' accounts, seemed to be quite weak. I will return to this later in the chapter.

Attendance

Whilst not an officially sanctioned "freedom", non-attendance in sixth form was made a lot easier by the combination of free periods and the absence of uniform – it is very challenging for young people in London to avoid detection whilst truanting in a school uniform, and the existence of free periods gave students a reliable excuse for not being in school or in lessons.

Most students recounted occasionally opting out of lessons – Habiba was the notable exception to this, a rare student with 100% attendance. Many students *regularly* chose to miss lessons. Patchy and poor attendance were recognised as problems at both St Bernard's and Riverview, and students provided a wide range of explanations for missing lessons.

Some students missed lessons in order to avoid confrontations with teachers – for example, when they had not completed assigned work:

"*Usually it's because I've not done the work and I don't feel like the hassle. So I'll email saying I've got an appointment and then do the work during the lesso*n." – Simarjit, St Bernard's

Many students missed lessons around assignment or UCAS deadlines – they had managed their time poorly and then prioritised meeting these deadlines (or not missing them too egregiously) over lesson attendance. This was not considered a legitimate reason for non-attendance, but some students seemed exasperated that staff would not understand their reasoning:

"You *set the deadline,* you've *been making me feel pressured, why do you think I'm not in lesson?!* You *told me I needed to get my UCAS done so I'm doing it*!" – Lejila, St Bernard's

Some students missed lessons because they did not like the teacher or reported not finding the lessons helpful – often for the reasons discussed at length in the previous chapter. However, generally lacking an orientation towards self-regulated learning, they did not then use the lesson time to engage in their own independent study – this was, effectively, time wasted. A few

students reported missing lessons when they were expected to complete a timed assessment or test and did not anticipate doing well in this, either due to having failed to prepare, or because they found the content particularly difficult:

"*There's no point going* [if you have not prepared] *because you're gonna flop. I'm not going to go in to sit like a C4 paper if I've not revised cos I don't want to get a U. I don't want to get a C! So, yeah, I'll miss lessons but mainly those ones because I don't want everyone to think. 'oh, Ibrahim, he thinks he's so smart but he isn't at all.' It's not useful to do a paper if you know that's not your actual level.*" – Ibrahim, Riverview

"*If I know there's a test sometimes. I can sometimes get really anxious and so then I don't go because I know I won't do well anyway."* – Regina, Riverview

Whilst it may be reasonably strategic for students to avoid sitting an assessment that they have not prepared for, this avoidance of testing meant that students missed opportunities for assessment and feedback, and, where class tests were followed by a normal lesson, could still result in them missing content. Student avoidance is discussed later in the chapter.

Students often explicitly linked missing lessons to the institutional culture of the sixth form and the influence of peers (a topic to be returned to later):

"*First year didn't count* [for a particular Maths paper], *so I just... After January, I just stopped going to those lessons, because... And also, I was influenced by everyone else not coming into the lessons, so I just thought, not many people are coming in, so I'm just not going to go, as well.*" – Abdullah, Riverview (commenting on his previous sixth form)

This attitude about first year somehow not "counting" pre-dated the A-level reforms that moved assessment to the end of the two-year course – it was a mindset that was widespread when the first year of A-levels resolutely *did* "count", for 50% of students' final grade. This seemed to be born of knowing that module retakes were both possible and very common; from Riverview students' accounts, retaking seemed to be part of the institutional culture of many sixth forms. Following the shift to linear assessment, which meant that no external assessment took place at the end of the first year unless sixth forms chose to enter students for optional AS exams, this attitude of the first year "not counting" was a considerable concern amongst teachers at Riverview.

A number of students reported missing lessons primarily to socialise and "chill" with friends:

"*Last year, when James and all of them lot* [students who had been asked to leave the sixth form] *were still here, then, I used to come in every day but I just didn't go to my lessons. Like after break,*

or say if we went out [left the school site] *at lunch, I'd intend to go back but then – basically, there was always someone. It's really stupid cos often we didn't even like – it like wasn't really – a lot of the time it wasn't even that fun. This year is different – if I don't wanna go lessons I just stay home*." – Natalie, St Bernard's

Amy had enrolled in a college a lengthy commute away from home in order to be away from her secondary school peer group so as to focus on academic success:

"*But then eventually, I did make friends. And it was just that, I think I made the friends, the type of friends that I had in secondary school. So it was just irrelevant for me to be travelling so far, because I was just always like, chilling in the cafeteria. I used to go to college and not go to any lessons. I used to get to college for 10 o'clock and leave at four and I haven't gone to a lesson*." – Amy, Riverview (commenting on her previous college)

These kinds of behaviours – not attending lessons and "chilling" in the social spaces of the school or college – are simply not available to students prior to sixth form, and the temptation proves difficult for many students to resist.

Some students carefully calibrated their attendance in order to miss as many lessons as possible whilst still receiving the discretionary bursary, which was conditional on maintaining a certain level of attendance:

"*Every couple of weeks I check my attendance with Ms Begum to see where it's at. Obviously I don't say that, I go 'Miss, can you check my attendance? I'm worried that Mr Johnson hasn't been doing the register and I don't want my attendance to go low.' And then if it's above 90 [%] I'm like, safe, and then I might chill that afternoon*." – Fahim, St Bernard's

Whilst fewer teenagers have part-time jobs than was the case when I was at school, many students do engage in part-time work during sixth form – seven of my interviewees had part-time jobs at the time of the interview. Whilst part-time employment can be viewed positively, it also contributed considerably to student attendance issues. For some students, part-time work was effectively essential as they were expected to be making some kind of financial contribution to their household or be supporting themselves:

"*It's kind of necessary because I have to pay for things, like I have to, like I'm very independent, like not very independent financially, obviously I live with my mum but I have to pay rent, I have to pay my own phone bill, I have to pay my own gym membership, have to pay for my own Oyster, have to pay for my own food, like I have to chip in. So if I don't, if I don't work, like I don't know how would I even get to college? Do you know what I mean? Cos my dad my dad hasn't given me a tenner since I was like, 12. So yeah, so that's just out of the question*." – Amy, Riverview

Amy was a student who, in the past, would likely have been eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance but was not eligible for free school meals. For other students, part-time employment may not have been essential, but they wanted to have their own money (often to spend on their phones and on clothes), and many students seemingly experienced a greater sense of reward from their jobs than they gained from school or college, even when pay was low and working conditions poor. This meant that many students could be found to, at least occasionally, prioritise shifts at work over sixth form attendance:

"*There was like a week... and my manager, the one I liked, she was like 'please, Tara, I'm begging you!' and said that she'd give me some Saturdays off when they were like proper staffed so I just worked full-time for a week! It was fun actually. I told my mum, obviously, and – she wasn't like – she agreed, basically*. *I was like* muhnneee!" – Tara, St Bernard's

"I was more focused on McDonald's and like getting my stars on my badge in McDonald's. I used to sit down and I used to study these little things I could get my stars at McDonald's because I wanted something to focus on those interested me. I was more interested in getting four pounds fifty an hour than going to that college honestly. Because it was just – sometimes I used to go to that college in my [McDonald's] uniform and then I just used to go to the class, the teacher wasn't there and then I just used to go to McDonald's early and say 'oh yeah, I can do a couple more hours'... I used to work – it got to the point where they had to take me back [hours] – like it was becoming illegal because of my age I was under 18 so they had to like spread it out... It wasn't even like – the money was so bad, four pounds fifty an hour." – Amy, Riverview

Students also reported missing lessons due to their mental health. Both my time as a first aider at Riverview and my causal conversations and interviews with students at both institutions demonstrated to me the incredibly widespread nature of adolescent student mental health issues, with numerous incidents of panic attacks and a very large number of (mainly female) students describing periods of serious anxiety and depression.

Several students suggested that meeting the requirements of A-levels made it close to inevitable that students' mental health would suffer:

"And to do that in like two years is ridiculous. It's just unrealistic. It's so unrealistic for them to assume that 17- and 18-year-olds can do that in two years, and still get good grades, and still be okay mentally. Because, they're not going to be okay mentally." – Zeynep, Riverview

Students feeling low and anxious could encourage them to withdraw from academic work, which, in turn, encouraged them to stay at home:

"'I'd try and do it [write an essay] *but I'd just sit there thinking 'you're so stupid, you're so stupid'. And I'd be so worried about getting it wrong that – I know it sounds stupid, but I'd just, I wouldn't do it, and then I'd be so worried about not having done it that I'd stay home* [from school]. *I spent lots of days just at home. I'd just stay home and cry. And I felt like everyone else was doing quite good and I wasn't."* – Laura, St Bernard's

"*After the* [easter] *holidays, when I started to realise – I started to get really anxious. I did try to revise but it was so difficult and so I'd only really done my sociology. For biology, we were meant to have all our notes organised and have done a paper but I hadn't done any of it and so I just didn't go in."* – Samilaah, Riverview

For a few students, it seemed that once they had begun regularly missing lessons in a particular subject, it became psychically difficult for them to return – they possibly felt a sense of shame and wished to avoid confrontation with their teacher:

"Because I hadn't been in for like two weeks – no, I'd been in, but I'd not been to his lessons, I didn't wanna be having deal with it. Like, I knew he'd be 'where have you been, you're so behind.' And I know it's stupid but I just couldn't face it. At first I thought 'I'll catch up and then I'll go back' but yeah, obviously I didn't. So what I did, I just left it 'til after half term so the like it – I thought it's probably less obvious." – Jamila, Riverview

During my periods of fieldwork, at both institutions, I witnessed "crackdowns" on punctuality and attendance. These were pre-announced to students via their form tutor or, at Riverview, by text message, with students warned that they were expected to be in all of their lessons, on time, and that this would be being closely monitored. To encourage punctuality, St Bernard's took to locking the sixth form entrance gate after a certain time each morning and afternoon. Riverview introduced a "ten-minute rule": students who arrived at their lesson more than ten minutes after its start would be turned away. To improve student attendance, staff members patrolled the school or college site to look for students who were on-site but not in their timetabled lessons. Indeed, Riverview purchased tablet devices for this purpose, and the staff member on duty would scan students' ID cards (required to be worn at all times in a college lanyard) to confirm that the student *did* have a free period and was not meant to be in a lesson. Where students did not arrive for school or college as expected, staff members would phone the student and their parents. Whilst this might have been a handful of calls to make for each of the St Bernard's sixth form mentors, these calls often took several hours at Riverview – and for the most part, went unanswered.

Despite the investment of considerable staff time and energy, these punctuality and attendance crackdowns had relatively little impact – indeed, a vice-principal at Riverview told me that

attendance had gone *down* in this period. Whilst the punctuality-focused practices did little to improve punctuality they did exclude latecomers from attending their lessons. This was deeply resented by many students who viewed these lateness policies as counterproductive, contradictory, and unfair. Further, knowledge of the attendance focus simply discouraged some students from being on-site. This avoided the risk of being unable to "escape", as one student put it to me, or to be identified as truanting – there is plausible deniability if the student is not seen by staff members. This highlights the real difficulty sixth forms can have in improving poor attendance, which appears to be a perennial problem.

As discussed in Chapter 5, students' secondary school experiences meant that many had not developed an orientation towards self-regulated learning. It is in this context that poor attendance and missed lessons become a significant problem, as students do not necessarily have the motivation, cultural capital, or the academic skills required to independently "catch up" on that which they missed.

Part II: The responsibility of sixth form

Students' independent work

In Chapter 5, I discussed the differences between GCSE and A-level and noted the importance of students' work outside the classroom for A-level achievement: the volume of content and limited time available, along with the increased academic challenge, necessitate students to be engaged in considerable independent academic work. However, as noted, students do not necessarily develop a "scholarly habitus" through their secondary schooling. In Chapter 6, I expanded on students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level and demonstrated that students experienced a range of challenges, making students' independent work even more important in order to compensate for these.

Students' often lackadaisical approach to their A-level studies did not go unnoticed by staff – indeed, it was the main complaint of teachers at both St Bernard's and Riverview. Mrs Lovell tended to attribute students' approach to "bone-idleness", and it is reasonable to believe that laziness – or the draw of more pleasurable activities – did play some role in students' seeming reluctance to engage in academic labour. However, I suspected that the full picture was more complicated than this. In Chapter 4, I described how students' A-level subject "choices" were not necessarily well thought through or positive choices. This may form part of the explanation for students' lack of independent work or weak engagement: students may lack intrinsic motivation because of a lack of interest in their A-level subjects. However, most students had made at least

some positive subject choices, and, even if they did not necessarily particularly *enjoy* all of their subjects, they were still choosing to pursue A-levels and intending to progress to higher education. Why do students who have chosen to study A-levels and profess to want to do well not necessarily engage in the academic labour required in order to achieve?

Students' independent work was a frequent topic of informal conversations with students and a topic in my interview schedule. I asked all of my interviewees about the time they spent on independent work and the form this took. Students' estimates of the average number of hours of independent work that they did each week are not necessarily reliable, potentially subject to both guessing and social desirability bias – which could operate to either exaggerate or minimise their effort. Interestingly, it was clearly a question that very few students had considered before, despite the fact that both St Bernard's and Riverview emphasised the importance of students engaging in at least four hours of independent work per week, per subject. Most students had to carry out some kind of calculation to reach a rough estimate, whilst a couple of students were very vague – Regina responded, "a lot", whilst Simarjit responded, "not many", and neither would be drawn further on the matter. A few students provided very generous estimations, which were swiftly recalculated when I expressed surprise. Whilst there are a couple of different ways of interpreting this, my sense was that they had just provided wild guesses, which, from my response, they realised were unrealistic. An illustrative selection of responses is provided:

"*Oooh, lemme think. Well on Mondays I go work, then Tuesday evenings I have street dance. I normally do homework on a Wednesday so I might do a couple of hours then. Thursday I've got a free after lunch so we normally go library until, like five, so I'll normally do like, say, two hours then. Saturday I'm at work all day, Sunday I'll sleep, and then I might do a couple hours Sunday, or I might go gym. How many's that? Like, six?"* – Tara, St Bernard's

"*Well maths, that's like every week, problem sets, that's, say, two hours. Then economics, that's bare long. Two hours at least. Then sociology, that's easy. Half an hour? No, let's say an hour. Then physics depends. It depends how much I get done in class. Overall? About five hours, I reckon*." – Fahim, St Bernard's

"*All the free time I have during lessons [cancelled lessons], I spend. You know how I have breaks [free periods] I will spend doing work during them times as well. I think I spend, on average, three hours [a day]. No, that's not right. It depends on the day cos – it depends when in the day I have a break. I think probably two or three hours most days*." – Habiba, Riverview

"*If I have homework, like proper homework* [formative assessment], *it'll take me like maybe an hour and a half. I don't really do notes aside from in [humanities] because she actually checks. And*

then I've got my coursework which like, we're meant to have started our research for that. Maybe like, I don't know, two, three or four hours a week? It really depends." – Katie, St Bernard's

"*Well, now, this year, I've started doing a lot, especially since January. Last year, it was – I'm trying to be persistent rather than say I'm going to do lots of work in one day. So, this year, I'm doing two hours every day after college, every day aside from Fridays cos I go to the mosque and then go home. And then there's frees. I'll sometimes go to the library. So, this year I'd say maybe twelve hours?*" – Abdullah, Riverview

Generally, students in their third year of A-levels (i.e., year 13 students who had retaken year 12 or were retaking year 13), such as Abdullah, reported doing more hours and taking a more consistent approach to their independent work, often contrasting the approach that they took now with the approach that they had taken previously which, they recognised, had proved inadequate:

"*And because I never used to practice so I never used to actually work at it. You know, that saying like 'hard work beats talent if talent don't work hard' or something like that, like I knew what I was doing but I never used to work hard at it. So I never did well. But whereas now I'm learning the content, but I'm actually doing what I need to – like I learnt my mistake, I know I'm learning from my mistakes.*" – Amy, Riverview

With the caveat that students' estimates are not necessarily reliable, almost all students reported spending fewer hours per week on independent work than what their sixth forms suggested was the minimum expectation; the responsibility of all sixth formers. Indeed, some students apparently spent less time per week on independent work than that which was provided by free periods, which, as suggested earlier by Cassie, at St Bernard's at least, were rarely used for work. It is possible that the suggested number of independent work hours per week is simply unrealistic for some students – for example, those who engage in a considerable number of hours of paid work or who have caring responsibilities. However, for most students, it should not be a wholly unrealistic figure.

Students experienced a range of challenges when it came to completing independent work, seemingly related to not having developed these skills during secondary school and/or students' limited cultural capital. Students reported being least likely to carry out independent work in those subjects where they experienced problems with teaching, despite these being the subjects that likely required the most individual effort if students were to perform well (or even pass). Research shows that students tend to work harder for teachers they have good relationships with, and students were more likely to engage in independent work if teachers

were in some way monitoring this. Further, students did not necessarily feel academically equipped to carry out independent work in those subjects where teaching was patchy. A number of students reported being unsure as to what their independent academic work should entail or dubious as to whether it was proving beneficial, and many students seemed to be using ineffective strategies. Students seemed to manage far better with concrete and boundaried tasks – for example, completing a set of maths problems – than activities such as note-taking, research, or revision, all of which require cultural capital:

"*When I take notes I end up just copying out what's in the textbook cos I don't want to miss anything important. So it takes ages and then there's – there's like no point cos it's too much to memorise anyway. Like I could never memorise everything that's in the textbook."* – Tolu, St Bernard's

"*The thing that I find difficult is – I don't really know how to explain it. But like say for psychology, the textbook has got so much information in, it's like more than you could ever learn. It's unrealistic to think you could learn that. But then there's also that thing of needing to bring in that flair. And then just like randomly, there'll be something where there's like nothing, not nothing, but not enough information on it, so you think, like, if that came up, how am I gonna write a 16 marker* [an essay response] *on that?"* – Zeynep, Riverview

"*Economics, we basically have to constantly research articles about current events – it's bare long. I've not done that in two months."* – Hamza, Riverview

"*I literally don't know how to revise. I don't! Our teacher says 'don't just read your notes' but I don't actually know what the best way is. I would say I'm quite a visual person so I've been making posters, but I don't actually think it's like going in.*" – Alexandra, Riverview

It seemed that many students had difficulty with the selection of material from textbooks and the fact that, on some topics, the textbook would need to be supplemented with additional material, either from teacher instruction or, possibly, from their own research. Both cultural capital and skills of self-regulation are implicated here. Students need to use their subject understanding along with the "feel for the game" of assessment to identify what information is crucial. Self-regulation is required as students need to self-monitor and self-reflect on their level of knowledge and understanding to ensure that it is adequate for what will be required in assessment. This is very likely to be new for students who experienced "spoon-feeding" at GCSE.

Students in their third year of A-levels were most likely to have developed learning and revision strategies that they found effective:

"I read Moonwalking with Einstein, Joshua Foer. It was a really interesting book, and it talks about how people can improve their own memory. No one really taught me how to connect stories to things to help you remember it. So that was really useful. For my politics unit two, I used one of the techniques, which was to – For example, how is the prime minister held accountable? In which ways is it held accountable? And then you'd have a story, like the prime minister walking, goes into the House of Commons, so parliament holds him accountable, walks further, goes into House of Lords, and the House of Lords holds him accountable, then goes out, has people approach him with cameras, and the press hold him accountable, then goes into a car and has a citizen throw something at the car. Then the public holds him accountable. So that was really useful, and I still just keep using it again and again." – Abdullah, Riverview

"We spent the whole textbook, just revising, revising, and as soon as it came to the [mock] *exam, we were just comparing answers. Everything looked similar and we were just like, hopefully we've smashed it. But that's the thing. When you're revising, it's good you're revising with friends. If you're alone, it's not fun. You won't be enjoying it. With revision, you've got to remember, don't put too much into your mind. Make sure your mind is less and the thing is, don't revise way too much. Revise a good amount and put the timing properly. Because timing and making sure that the revision is properly laid out. What I say is don't highlight stuff. What I say is mind maps."* – Jamila, Riverview

Whilst students experienced some challenges in relation to independent work, just about all students acknowledged that they *could* be working far harder, even if this was positioned as something that they were unprepared or unlikely to do – as Simarjit put it to me during one of our tuition sessions, "we want to do well, but we don't want to work hard."

I identified amongst students three main tendencies that were implicated in many students' limited engagement in independent work: complacency, giving up, and the avoidance of challenge.

Complacency

Many students attributed their limited engagement in independent work to "complacency". This was a term also used frequently by teachers – indeed, St Bernard's students were warned against being complacent in their very first sixth form assembly, and many students noted that individual class teachers had also exhorted them not to be complacent:

"Yeah. I think they – well I know that they tell that to every student. I think it's a part of their job to tell them that for A-Levels in particular, but obviously we still have that sort of – I guess we don't really believe them." – Hamza, Riverview

Whilst I therefore thought it likely that students may have adopted the term from teachers (it is not a word I would associate with the average London teenager's lexicon), it did seem to accurately capture the predominant approach to A-level study at St Bernard's and Riverview. The complacency that students described tended to be driven by their sense that they had achieved relatively effortlessly (if not necessarily particularly highly) at GCSE (as discussed in Chapter 5), which encouraged a kind of naïve optimism, at least at the outset. This was recognised by a number of students:

"*I think complacency after like year eleven. In year eleven, especially, it's complacency in terms of learning new things. In terms of thinking that you know it? And you pretty much do, because in the GCSEs, it's very, not rigid, but only a certain number of things can come up. A-levels is way more broad*." – Lejila, St Bernard's

"*People that don't do that well in A-levels is mainly to do with, I think it's more to do with they're used to, because when you're doing the GCSE, they're used to the difficulty of GSCEs, so if you stick to the same difficulty level in A-levels, you're going to fall apart... If you enter A-levels and you still think they're the same as GCSEs, and because you didn't work hard in GCSEs, you're going to do the same in A-levels, if you're complacent like that, then it's not going to go well*." – Maruan, Riverview

Whilst Maruan appeared to be diagnosing this tendency in others, this was clearly based on his own personal experience: having muddled his way through GCSEs (not attaining highly, but highly enough to be able to progress to A-levels), he took this same approach at A-level only to find that this would not be sufficient to even attain pass grades.

Sometimes student "complacency" could be understood as a kind of arrogance, underpinned by very high self-belief. This was identified by myself and teachers in a number of boys who had achieved relatively highly at GCSE (or, in some cases, in the first year of A-level) and were often described by teachers as "cocky":

"*I guess I was complacent. That's what I was told anyway. I mainly got what we were doing and thought...* [laughing] *aight*" – Alistair, St Bernard's

Alistair, a very capable student, was able to follow what was happening in lessons and complete assigned work and, therefore, initially felt that it was unnecessary to expend further effort, his "complacency" only interrupted (at least for a time) by the intervention of a teacher, as described in the previous chapter.

Ibrahim was one of my two interviewees who had performed relatively highly at AS level and had then gone on to significantly underachieve at A-level, necessitating his retaking the year at Riverview:

"*Really it all fell apart after AS. I got behind to start with because I was so focused on UCAS but also I got complacent. Like I started prioritising other things and I didn't realise it* [the second year of A-levels] *was going to be a different level."* – Ibrahim, Riverview

This tendency for students to be more invested in their university aspirations than their studies is discussed in the following chapter.

Some students described what seemed to be a symbiotic relationship between complacency and weak engagement: complacency encouraged weak engagement, and then weak engagement sustained their belief that their complacent approach was adequate. This is in line with the famous Dunning-Kruger effect, whereby the "incompetent" lack the metacognitive skills to appraise their abilities and thus evaluate them overgenerously (Kruger and Dunning, 1999).

The symbiotic relationship between complacency and weak engagement is captured in Alexandra's account:

"*To be honest, I didn't really – like I know it sounds stupid, but I – it hadn't like hit me yet how much there was... My [sciences] teacher said 'you're coasting, you can't afford to coast', but I hadn't realised that myself yet. I needed to realise that for myself. It was only when it actually came round to like near mocks and – my [humanities] teacher gave us one of those topic sheets where you like – you RAG rate how well you know each of the topics and half of them I was like 'what?' Like literally, I'd not even heard of the topic*." – Alexandra, Riverview

Many students described how their peers influenced or encouraged their complacency. A relaxed approach and limited academic labour seemed to be part of the institutional habitus of both sixth forms:

"*The whole entire year, it got to a point that I forgot that you're doing A levels. At that time, I didn't have a plan on what I want to do next year, and the year after. I was more distracted. That moment, I was in the moment, kind of thing. I didn't think of, oh, what should I do next? Or, how is that going to affect me? I just did what everyone did, kind of thing… Staying after college, in the common room, quite late. And just sit around. Or, go to McDonald's and just sit there and eat, when I have an assignment due in the next day, or something like that. It didn't bother me.*" – Fawzia, Riverview

Fawzia attributed this in part to the additional freedoms of college, which may prove particularly tantalising to students (often female) who have little freedom at home. However, it was also related to her chosen peer group:

"[It was] *the group of people I chose. Because, the group of people that you chill with is going to represent who you are, as well. So, my friends, they weren't focused on doing their assignments. They didn't want to do it. So, I became like them. So, I just didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to chill around and just have fun. That's it. But I think that's lot of people at college.*"

In his first sixth form, Hamza found that, as an "external" – a transfer student – he had to work particularly hard to establish himself in the well-known and successful school that he had joined. This meant that he did not feel like it was an option for him to join those students who were engaged in independent scholarly activity whilst at sixth form, and he was complacent about independent work:

"*So they would class us as externals and then they would have internals... So I'd be like an external student. It was hard to fit in. I think I'd just play a lot of chess. That's it... But I still just kept to myself and usually it goes that external students make friends with external students. I mean we did have the odd friendly couple of internal students that were all right, but everyone was to themselves really and to their own sort of clique and group. I found that sort of affected my grades in some way because I was constantly trying to fit in or make new friends and that sort of clashed with my time to revise... I was complacent and I think my investment in each subject wasn't enough. And I could sort of see that because I'd see some internals would be in like the private study room for ages doing work. And they'd still have enough time for their social life and that's what I really cared about. Like I said before my social life at the time because I said bye to all my friends in secondary and I didn't keep in touch with most of them. It was very weird. So my aim was to make new friends and close friends and hopefully best friends... but we were all – not all, but mostly, mostly we were complacent when it came to our subjects*." – Hamza, Riverview

In interviews, I asked students about their parents' involvement in their education at different stages and often circled back to this topic when students described their poor attendance or minimal independent work during sixth form: how did parents respond to this? Whilst all students reported that their parents cared about their education, the general consensus was that parents were less *concerned* than they might have been during the young person's secondary schooling:

"My parents obviously care, particularly my dad. They want me to do well but like – it's not like GCSE. I guess I've proved myself... I think it's also my sisters – they've had some of the fights. And my parents – they're like 'it's up to you now'. And like, if I sleep in – so like Tuesday, I have one class and then a free. If I stay in bed, I just say 'I've got a free'. And it's not like I've got a homework planner. They're not, like, checking up on me." – Lejila, St Bernard's

"*I feel like when I was younger they were more involved into it, but as soon as I started to get older, they've pulled themselves away. And they're making us feel much more independent about our own education and our own learning… I think that's good because it's stopping the spoon feeding as well; you're being spoon fed at home and you're being spoon fed in school, and I feel by them pulling away, it's a good thing. Because they're not going to be there for the rest of your life, they're not going to be there when you're married, and you need to learn to be independent for yourself. So, in a way I think it's good*." – Samilaah, Riverview

As would be expected, parents tend to reduce their involvement as their children progress through education, and, once a young person reached sixth form (and parents knew that they intended to go to university), parents apparently monitored them far less. Further, as several students noted, if a parent (almost always a mother) *did* comment on or enquire after homework, a sixth former always has a ready-made excuse: "I did it in my free". From students' accounts, and my own experience meeting with parents of sixth formers, it seems that parents generally feel that it is both less necessary to monitor their child's schooling and more difficult to manage, particularly where a young person has transferred to a new institution. The expectation of limited parental involvement was part of the institutional habitus of both sixth forms. Several students noted that this allowed them to "get away" with their complacent approach to sixth form, and Samilaah's comments highlight how students might experience a far greater sense of independence at both school and home.

Many students described how their sense of complacency was only disrupted by the receipt of very poor grades:

"*I just wasn't really bothered, and then I got my mock results* [U, E, E] *and then… now I'm like actually trying, and I'm kind of… I actually quite enjoy it? Like I'd never seen an exam paper until the mocks* [note: I knew this was inaccurate as we had gone through the sociology papers together] *and now I feel like I know what I actually have to do and I got to if I wanna go uni.*" – Tolu, St Bernard's

"*I think everything just hit me around the end of January* [following the receipt of mock results]*. It's like, wow, are you going to go through results day number two and not get the grades that you want? And you're going to lose your parents' trust... [Before] my parents were very worried for me, because they thought I was going to fall off the map, kind of thing. So, when they saw that I'd made this decision to do A levels, they will do anything so that could happen for me, which I was very grateful for. So, end of January, it hit me, so I started revising a lot more.*" – Fawzia, Riverview

For a time at least, the receipt of poor grades galvanised these students: they could see what kinds of grades their current approach involving limited independent work produced and

wanted to do better, necessitating working far harder. Most students had aspirations to attend university, and several students mentioned not wanting to disappoint their parents. However, for many students, this disruption of complacency came too late: even revitalised effort would prove insufficient for the attainment of the kinds of grades that they had hoped to achieve or needed to pursue their chosen courses. Further, some students identified other tendencies that would militate against the kind of scholarly labour required for success.

Giving up

Whilst many students described not engaging in much independent academic work as a result of their (at least initial) complacency, as discussed in Chapter 5, students also tended to identify that A-levels were more academically challenging than GCSEs.

Zeynep described being complacent for the first six weeks of term, it then dawning on her that A-levels were "*very different*". However, rather than this encouraging her to work harder, she describes being overwhelmed:

"So, it was a month and a half in. A month and a half in. And I was just thinking, wow, it's very different… It really put me off. I didn't finish the thought. I was just like, shit! It just put me off it, because I felt like every time I learnt something new, every time I understood something new, there was another thing that I didn't understand. And instead of being like, oh, yes, that's a new thing for me to learn. That's good. I'm challenging myself. Like I did this year. Like the last couple of years, before this year, I saw it as, oh, what's the point? Every time I do some good, there's something else I need to learn, and it's sort of like going back to square one. And it's not really, but at that time, my mentality was like every time I took ten steps forward, it's like twenty steps back, kind of thing. Like every time I thought, okay, I'm doing good, I'm learning some new stuff, I'm understanding the new content, then it's like, oh, wait, now I've got ten other things to learn now. And I was like, okay, so what's the point in me learning those if I'm just going to go back to square one? Obviously sort of like that. Again, hindsight." – Zeynep, Riverview

Seemingly, the volume of content at A-level – her feeling that "*every time I took ten steps forward, it's like twenty steps back, kind of thing"* – encouraged her to give up, thinking, "*what's the point in me learning those if I'm just going to go back to square one?"*

Many students described "giving up" when they found academic material or tasks difficult.:

"*If I'm in class I'll ask for help but, like, say I'm at home to be honest with you, I'll just give up. I know it's not good, like it's not something I'm proud of but, yeah*." – Tara, St Bernard's

"So, I'm enjoying it in terms of if I feel like I can do the subject I'm more willing to participate more willing to engage more into all the homeworks, but I feel like if I can't do something I give up easily... So, if I'm finding it hard, I'll normally give up." – Alexandra, Riverview

"I think I just gave up really. Because it was so tough and also because the people around me were people that were older than me, the majority of everyone here in this school is older than me. But all of them just said I have to retake maths, I have to retake maths, so all of these guys telling me to retake, it was getting to my head, what's the point of me just putting in a lot of effort when I'm going to retake it." – Maruan, Riverview

Whilst Maruan's chosen strategy – giving up on a module with the view to retaking it at a later date – is no longer available to A-level students, students could still be found to "give up" on particular topics:

Regina: *I really like learning about the Russian Revolution because I understand it and because I've done it at secondary school as well, so I knew the basics way before I started my A-Level history. So, because I understand what we're talking about in lessons, I find it so much easier and more enjoyable, I guess. Whereas my other module about the whole English Revolution, I find it really difficult because there's lots that you need to know and it gets really confusing and I just get frustrated and I just give up.*

NL: *Do you think when you find things really difficult you do have a tendency to give up?*

Regina: *Yes.*

NL: *Has that always been the case, do you reckon?*

Regina: *Really, yes… When something is difficult, I don't really enjoy it and I give up.*

(Regina, Riverview)

Regina's account demonstrates the relationship between understanding (supported by prior knowledge), enjoyment, and effort, these creating a virtuous circle. It also suggests how cultural capital is implicated in students' engagement. For Regina, the English Revolution was proving too challenging, seemingly in part because of Regina's lack of background knowledge, the topic incorporating *"so many different areas that I've not seen before"*. This meant that Regina had "given up". For Regina, this meant that she was not doing any independent work in relation to this topic – she was behind on her notes and reading and had not attempted to complete any of

the homework questions her teacher had set. Whilst Regina recognised in herself this tendency to give up, my attempts to explore it with her were rebuffed. This may have been about Regina's own lack of insight or could potentially be explained by, for example, embarrassment. Whilst many students, including Regina, struggled to articulate why it was that they tended to "give up" when faced with challenging work, others demonstrated a level of insight.

In my interview with Habiba, she described some of the challenges she was experiencing in a humanities subject where she was finding certain material particularly difficult:

NL: *What's your response if you feel that?*

Habiba: *I just give up. I'll be like, I can't be bothered.*

NL: *If you were to think carefully about that, why do you think that is?*

Habiba: *I think there's just something in… When I find something too difficult, I just switch off.*

At this point, my efforts to explore this further with Habiba proved fruitless, and we moved on. However, we circled back to this topic later on in the interview:

Habiba: *With me, when I'm writing an essay, I'll write a page, but I'll cross it all out.*

NL: *Yes, Andrew told me that.*

Habiba: *He thinks I'm a perfectionist.*

NL: *Yes; he said. Which, in lots of ways, is a wonderful quality. What's going through your head when you cross your work out?*

Habiba: *I just don't like how I write it. That's why I cross it out. Because if I knew – I will try to make a point, and then it won't sound right in my head, so I will just cross it out. And then I will write the same thing over and over again.*

NL: *Would you say that is a kind of perfectionism? Would you agree with that analysis?*

Habiba: *Yes.*

NL: *What do you do when you find something difficult?*

Habiba: *I'll try my hardest to try to understand it. Like in the university thing* [a widening participation programme], *I tried my hardest to understand it, but then I will just give up.*

NL: *So would you tend not to seek help?*

Habiba: *Yes. I don't know why I don't do that. I'm just weird.*

NL: *It's quite a difficult thing to do, to ask for help.*

Habiba: *Yes, because, I don't want to look stupid.*

(Habiba, Riverview)

Whilst earlier in the interview, Habiba had suggested that she gave up when something was difficult because she could not be "*bothered*", implying laziness or a lack of care, this later exchange spoke of real insecurity and fear of looking "*stupid*". Her teacher noted that she really lacked confidence – a phrase often used in relation to female students and rarely male students. This kind of approach to work can be explained by achievement goal theory. Achievement goal theory suggests that there are two main goals driving individuals in achievement situations: performance goals and learning goals (Elliot and Dweck, 1988). Performance goals are further subdivided into performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals; whilst performance-approach goals are about wanting to outperform others, performance-avoidance goals refer to individuals wanting to avoid appearing incompetent (Middleton and Midgley, 1997). Alistair's comment typifies the approach of an individual with a performance-approach goal:

"*Obviously I want to do well but like I don't always want to put the work in* [laughing]*. Obviously I'm doing a lot more now than I was doing before, but like, I don't wanna – Basically, I don't want to be going like proper flat out. I'll work hard if I know I can get, like, say nearly full marks. If it's something that I'm finding more difficult I'll probably take it a bit more easy*." – Alistair, St Bernard's

He is prepared to put effort in when he expects to do very well (and, possibly, outperform others) whilst making less effort with that which is more challenging, a tendency that is discussed below.

Habiba, however, seems to hold a performance-avoidance goal. One of her common responses when she found work difficult – crossing out what she had written – can be understood as motivated by this: she was more concerned about not appearing "*stupid"* to her teacher than she was about further developing her subject understanding or essay writing, as would be concomitant with holding a learning goal. Performance-avoidance goals tend to be associated

with high anxiety, disorganised study habits, and help avoidance (Senko et al., 2011), all of which can be seen in Habiba's account. Habiba's seeming achievement goal orientation meant that she had great difficulty submitting some homework assignments and had received the equivalent of U grades in several class assessments when she had crossed out most or all of her work. These kinds of academic tendencies, seen in a number of students, are suggestive of fragile learner identities potentially shaped by previous experiences of assessment (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

Avoidance of challenge

As well as explaining why students might "give up", fear of "looking stupid" or, more generally, fear of failure has been identified as crucial to understanding students' various other "avoidance behaviours" (Jackson, 2006a), or or why students do not engage effortfully with their academic work. Some students recognised this tendency in themselves and were quite explicit about it: they were avoiding making too much effort in order to protect themselves from failing.

Chelsea is an academically able student who could have been performing at a much higher level at A-level, which she was aware of. However, she had an irreverent personality and an outwardly fairly flippant attitude towards her studies. In our interview, she identified the ethics component of philosophy and ethics A-level as the topic that she struggled most with, in part because of the nature of the material:

"*I literally don't understand it. For me, I only understand things that exist* [laughing]. *People don't really understand when I say this. With me, ethics, I call it ghosts – like morality and all those things. Because it's not there, I don't really understand it. Because even though sociology's a bit like that, it is there at the same time. But like in year 13 when we started on like what's it called, like sociology and science – what's it called when you have your values? That's when I was like, 'I don't understand what I'm learning about'. So, ethics was one of those things. I was like 'I don't know what you're asking me.'*" – Chelsea, St Bernard's

Whilst Chelsea was seemingly being somewhat facetious and, I thought it likely, seeking to entertain me, it seemed that she really did dislike and struggle with some of the more abstract content of her A-level subjects – this clearly not helped by the minimally guided instruction described in the previous chapter. We moved on to a discussion about how she dealt with this challenge:

NL: *And how do you deal with something you find challenging? Like with ethics.*

Chelsea: *Normally I leave it very last minute.*

NL: *And why do you think that is?*

Chelsea: *Because I know I'm not as great as I think I am. Like with ethics. I wouldn't say I gave up, but I basically just thought 'that's enough work'. I didn't work less hard than I did before, but I also didn't work any harder. I'm not going to work too hard at something that I know I find hard.*

Here, Chelsea seems to suggest that her attempts at avoidance of challenge are related to a desire to protect her self-worth: she does not want to engage with academic work that will reveal herself as "*not as great as I think I am"*. This could also be understood as suggestive of a mastery-avoid goal, which captures a student wanting to avoid *losing* their sense of competence (Elliot and McGregor, 2001).

Chelsea did tend to complete assigned formative work – that is, work which would be marked (she indicated that she could not be bothered with other work such as note-taking). However, work which she found challenging (or expected to find challenging) was almost always rushed – she described herself later in the interview as "*a last-minute merchant*" – and tended to involve limited effort. Whilst it is highly likely that greater effort in her independent work would have paid off for Chelsea, as noted by Covington, effort is "a double-edged sword" (1984:10). Chelsea's limited effort may well have been a quite deliberate strategy: poor feedback or a low grade could be justified to herself (and potentially others) by the fact that the work had been completed in a hurried fashion.

The avoidance of challenge and giving up combined in some accounts. Having underperformed in year 13 at her previous sixth form, Jamila was retaking in order to improve her grades. However, she described withholding some effort, particularly in relation to a couple of topics that she found challenging:

"*That's why I can't – if I worked hard, and then that's it, which is stupid because I shouldn't really do that. But like, my response is 'Okay, well, you worked hard, you didn't do it, evidently you're not going to ever do it well, you're not going to do well in it, so just give up'... So, I think that's like one thing, I just don't want to put too much in it now in case I don't get well in the end because it's like failing again. Well not fail but I don't want to, I don't wanna get like working hard and then not doing well again it's like, I don't want to go through that."* – Jamila, Riverview

Jamila's comment that "*evidently you're not going to ever do it well, you're not going to do well in it, so just give up"* is suggestive of a "fixed" mindset (Dweck, 2006): believing that there is little that can be done to improve performance. Whilst, evidently, the fact that Jamila *was* retaking suggests that she did not truly believe this, it did seem that her withholding of effort may have

been some kind of defensive strategy to avoid her having "*to go through that".* It seems that Jamila was determined to avoid the sense of worthlessness that accompanies "incompetency" (Covington, 1984). Jamila had received four out of five of her university offers and intended to select UCL as her UCAS "Firm" choice, noting that she wasn't "*that far off*" in terms of grades. However, she quickly noted that she did not necessarily have to aim for her offer (AAB):

"*And also like knowing chemistry isn't as competitive and also like they kind of they kind of make leeways for you if you don't get the grades. So, which is like kind of – and also, I've just got an unconditional offer from Nottingham. So, I'm like 'do I want to go to uni next year and just leave A-levels?'"*

Despite Jamila's ambition to attend UCL, it seems that avoiding *"working hard and then not doing well again"* was more important than achieving as highly as possible, and Jamila's withholding of effort can be considered a form of "self-handicapping" (Martin et al., 2003). This was encouraged by holding an unconditional offer, which meant that she could avoid the challenge of aiming to meet UCL's offer – students' university choices are discussed further in the next chapter.

Complacency, giving up, and the avoidance of challenge combined in several students' accounts of their sixth form experience. For example, Hamza described an initially complacent approach to A-levels, which gave way to the avoidance of work through procrastination as a result of feeling overwhelmed by the challenge he faced:

"*I realised that* [A-levels required more work] *but then I would procrastinate in so many ways and that was the biggest enemy of mine, procrastination. I mean the advice that was given to me by my uncle was as soon as you touch college ground you have to start work from day one. You can't slack. It's not possible. If you want to succeed that's exactly what you have to do and I tried I think for the first – then I think I got complacent as usual. Yeah, this is what happened. I would say I fell behind because maybe I fall behind one day* [due to absence] *so I say okay I have a day's worth of work that I need to recover so I'm going to do that today and if not, it would end up becoming a week. I have a week's worth of work there I'm going to revise over the weekend and then I'd get distracted over the weekend and it became a month and I was like, 'I can do this'. I kept on telling myself I can do this when I really couldn't. And yeah, I mean that's the pattern for my procrastinating. That's where it got to. The fact that I couldn't establish a difference between GCSE… I tried treating A-Levels like GCSE*." – Hamza, Riverview

Natalie described a cycle of hard work, complacency, panic, and procrastination:

"*So then it got to, like, easter holidays* [of AS year] *and I proper worked. Like literally, down the library most days, proper working. And yeah, I did alright! Like I definitely could've done better but given my mocks I was like, cool cool. But then I fell back into again, that complacency. I started missing lessons and I'd say to myself 'I'm gonna catch up over the weekend', and then there was UCAS – I was like proper stressed over my personal statement – and then it was just like 'shit', I've got a lot to do, and I'd be like 'breathe'. I thought I was doing alright but then I could tell that it was like way harder. So, it was mixed. I'd think it was okay and then I'd realise how much there was. Like I'd see the textbook* [miming paging through a book] *and be like 'no, no, no'. I had bursts of like 'let's do it' but then I'd do it and be like 'ooh this is hard'. Let's relax, let's relax a bit. And then I'd be like, let's just watch one episode... Procrastination's been a big thing*.'" – Natalie, St Bernard's

Whilst Natalie had ended up "*proper working*" prior to her AS exams, she had fallen back into her "*complacency*" in year 13. This meant that she felt overwhelmed by the volume of content and its difficulty, which encouraged Natalie's procrastination, as a way of avoiding challenge.

In this part of the chapter, I have discussed students' approach to independent work in sixth form. As well as noting that many students struggled with independent work, I have explored why students tended to do less than was expected of them, seeking to go beyond the suggestion that students are "lazy", noting that many had what might be considered maladaptive orientations to learning which, I believe, can be explained in relation to students' learner identities – how students see themselves as learners (Reay, 2010) and their approaches to learning (Archer and Francis, 2007).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the "freedom" and responsibility of sixth form. Students were, on the whole, enthusiastic about the greater freedom that they were afforded and, at St Bernard's, irritated by an overly restrictive dress code, which they saw as limiting their freedom. However, whilst enjoying their freedoms, students arguably did not always behave responsibly with these. This can be seen in students' tendency to opt to miss lessons. Further, students often took fairly little responsibility for their learning, engaging in relatively little of the independent work that, it was explained to them, was the responsibility of all sixth formers.

So, why is it that so many students at St Bernard's and Riverview did not demonstrate responsibility for their learning? I believe that there are two central reasons: the context provided by the education and assessment system in England, and students' cultural capital. As

discussed in Chapter 5, many students' secondary schools emphasised GCSE performance, and, through a narrowed curriculum and spoon-feeding, GCSE achievement could be said to have been prioritised over student learning. This, along with the general high-stakes exam culture of England's education system, is likely to have shaped students' learner identities and may have may have encouraged the development of performance as opposed to learning goals. Students' secondary schooling had not effectively prepared them for the next stage of their learning careers. They had not, on the whole, developed skills for independent learning. Further, as outlined in the previous chapter, students' often weak subject and "background" knowledge represented a real challenge at A-level, and many students described struggling to access elements of the curriculum or being overwhelmed by the volume of content. These issues, resulting from students' prior schooling experiences and social class backgrounds, may result in perceptions of low ability in relation to A-level. The combination of performance goals and the perception of low ability has been found to produce a "pattern of strategy deterioration, failure attribution, and negative affect" (Elliot and Dweck, 1988: 5) – in other words, students may see the challenge as insurmountable, themselves as lacking in capacity, feel bad, and give up.

Whilst students identified that sixth form offered more freedom, and, generally, there was a consensus that secondary school had been stricter, students also noted that their secondary schools had been rather more supportive and "forgiving" of students:

"*I think in secondary school it's different. Because you've got that thing where even if you're like a naughty kid or whatever they just give you so many chances, like they'll put – like you get put into centres or you get given this or you get to transfer – like there was kids that came to my school because they've been kicked out of their school, but they don't just kick you out they'll transfer you somewhere else, they're not just gonna kick you out and leave you on the street. Whereas with college, if your attendance drops below 70[%] and they'll just be like 'out, bye, whatever.'*" – Amy, Riverview

A number of students recounted feeling great freedom and little responsibility and then, very suddenly to them, finding that their sixth form place was in jeopardy:

"*I think I got a 60% attendance and they didn't do a thing about it. They were just like I think the care that they had was very minimal and it was just small. They didn't mind if you turned up late. They wouldn't set homework. I think they weren't as strict. They were just really lenient and they didn't mind as much but then when it came to parents' evening and stuff they'd make sure they targeted you in that case.... I didn't understand the severity of my situation at the time.*" – Hamza, Riverview (commenting on his previous sixth form)

Whilst it is rightfully very difficult to permanently exclude secondary school pupils, this is not the case for sixth formers, and students can be readily asked to leave for reasons that would not be permissible in secondary school, including truancy. Whilst exclusion is not exactly used lightly – Mr Andrews explained to me how he had to perform what he described as a "balancing act", weighing up how excluding pupils likely to receive poor grades might affect already tight funding – it is certainly more straightforward. Further, the "balancing act" that Mr Andrews described may not always be necessary, with a vice-principal at Riverview confiding in me that she had found the solution to this tricky issue: excluding pupils only after a certain point in the academic year meant that the per-pupil funding allocated to them would not have to be returned. I was never able to verify whether this claim was accurate (or, indeed, the practice legal), but it could certainly account for Riverview's decision to ask a significant number of students to leave during the spring term. Overall, whilst sixth forms provided students with greater freedom, this often translated into greater freedom to underachieve and fail. In addition, sixth forms had greater freedom to exclude those students deemed not to be fulfilling their responsibilities.

This chapter has discussed the freedom and responsibility of sixth form. The following chapter will consider students' post- sixth form aspirations.

Chapter 8: Aspirations

The previous four chapters have discussed students' choices, their experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, and the freedom and responsibility of sixth form. This chapter will discuss students' aspirations which, it might be expected, should spur them on, even when faced with the challenges discussed in the previous chapters.

It has been noted that aspiration and social mobility were at the heart of the New Labour project (Butler and Hamnett, 2011), and there has been a fairly consistent focus on, and high degree of interest in, aspirations since, often with reference to higher education participation (Walkerdine, 2011). Indeed, the term "aspiration" was used eight times in the 2016 White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education, 2016), demonstrating that it remained significant within policy discourse at the time of my research. There is a normative perception that "higher" aspirations are a good thing, and low aspirations are regularly claimed to have a close or even causal relationship with a variety of social problems, including education inequalities (Cabinet Office, 2008). The use of aspirations within policy presumes that individuals from poorer backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations, that low aspirations lead to low achievement, and that raising aspirations means that young people from deprived backgrounds achieve better outcomes, aiding social mobility – which, as Reay (2013) argues, is, anyway, no panacea.

This formulation of the relationship between socioeconomic background, aspirations, and achievement is intuitively appealing, and I had, to at least some degree, at one point accepted it. However, in my work and my research, I have found the aspirations of A-level students in deprived areas of inner-city London to be strikingly high and, indeed, largely aligned with mainstream understandings of what constitute "high aspirations". Given these students' A-Level results, the obvious conclusion is that high aspirations are not sufficient to prevent low achievement or failure at A-level. This chapter will explore the nature of, influences on, and meanings behind the aspirations of students at St Bernard's and Riverview. Finally, I will consider why it is that these notably high aspirations may not produce the outcomes proposed by the aspirations discourse.

The nature of students' aspirations

Students at both St Bernard's and Riverview reported high aspirations, both in terms of intending to progress to higher education – and, occasionally, expressed institutional preferences – and in terms of careers. The vast majority of A-level students at both institutions applied to and intended to attend university: the desire for higher education was the most prominent of all the aspirations voiced by the young people. Indeed, seemingly for many, A-levels were regarded as little more than a "stepping-stone" to university – a necessary evil, with little intrinsic value.

"I just want to get them [A-levels] *done and get out of here… If you could just go straight* [to university] *without A-levels, that's what I'd do. I'm only here so I can go uni after*." – Chelsea, St Bernard's

At St Bernard's, every single A-level student applied to university, and, during my research, over 90% of second year A-level students at Riverview College applied, with most of the students who had not applied intending on doing so through Clearing, when they received their A-level results in August. Applications were for a varied range of degree courses, representing sciences, arts and humanities, and social sciences.

Interviewees' choices or expressed interests are shown in the following table – whilst not representative of either institution, this demonstrates the variety of courses and careers to which students applied.

Name	**Degree choice**	**University preference**	**Career aspiration**
		St Bernard's	
Alistair	Economics	LSE	Finance/ media
Chelsea	Sociology	Edinburgh	N/A
Fahim	Accounting & Finance	Middlesex	Finance
Katie	Law	University of Law	Lawyer
Laura	Business management	N/A	Business
Lejila	Psychology	Goldsmiths	Advertising
Natalie	Sociology	Goldsmiths	Media
Paul	Engineering	Queen Mary	Engineer
Simarjit	Law	University of Law	Lawyer
Tara	History	Goldsmiths	Lawyer/ media
Tolu	Midwifery	City University	Midwife
		Riverview	
Abdullah	Economics	LSE	Economist
Alexandra	Accounting & Finance	City University	Accountant
Amy	Sociology	City University	Police/ business owner
Dawit	Economics	Middlesex	Economist
Fawzia	Pharmacy	King's College	Pharmacist
Habiba	International relations	N/A	N/A
Hamza	Economics	City University	Actor/ business
Ibrahim	Law	King's College	Lawyer
Jamila	Chemistry	UCL	Finance
Maruan	Economics	Queen Mary	Economist
Regina	Law	N/A	Lawyer
Samilaah	Biomedical sciences	Middlesex	Biomedical scientist
Zeynep	Psychology	Dutch university	Psychologist

Unsurprisingly, gender differences were visible in degree choice: economics and computing applications were male dominated, and psychology and sociology applications were female dominated. However, other subject choices – for example, law and biomedical sciences – were much less clearly gendered[6]. This may be influenced by ethnicity, with previous research finding that minority ethnic women's choices are less stereotypically gendered than those of White British women (Mirza, 1992; Archer and Francis, 2007). This may be an outcome of factors including the impact of ethnicity on the construction of gendered subjectivities; how student ethnicity influences teacher expectations and career guidance; and a recognition of the constraints of a potentially racist employment market (Francis, 2006b), which, through "relative risk aversion", may encourage "safer" degree choices (McMaster, 2017).

In terms of careers, students generally aspired to enter professional and high-status occupations including the law, finance, media, and professions in the health sector. For most young people, the opportunity to earn "good money" was a key underlying motivation, although this often existed alongside other motivations, including helping people and prestige. Motivations behind and meanings of aspirations will be returned to later in the chapter.

There was very little evidence of the deferment of aspirations via the "wait and see'" approach identified among urban, working-class students in other research (Archer et al., 2010) on this topic. This may reflect the slightly older age of participants in my research, or, possibly, the emphasis on higher education and careers now found in London schools, the expectation of higher education participation now very much part of schools' institutional habitus. Indeed, not only did most young people report knowing what they wanted to do in the future, there was some condemnation of the "wait and see" approach:

"I find it silly when, you know, people from universities come and give a talk and say 'you know, it's okay if you don't know what you're doing [want to do] *now'. Because I think no; no the person, the individual didn't put much thought into it, and I think they're not caring enough about the future."*
– Hamza, Riverview

In a casual conversation, Tara, one of my interviewees, described students who did not know "what they want to do in life" as "wastemen" and discursively distanced herself from these students: whilst she was mature, future-oriented, and destined for success, they were immature

[6] This would be very different if BTEC students were included in the analysis, with nursing/ education studies applications female dominated, and business applications male dominated.

and going nowhere in life. Whilst the insult “wasteman” can be applied to both males and females, it was clear from the context – a conversation about her recent ex-boyfriend and his group of friends, all attending a college – that she associated this perceived lack of direction with boys, and McRobbie notes that a "having a well-planned life" is "a social norm of contemporary femininity" (2007: 729).

Regina was also disdainful of her directionless peers and, describing her conscious decision to avoid engaging socially at Riverview, suggested:

“A lot of people that I know here, they don’t really know what they want to do with their life and it’s not the type of people that I like being friends with. I like being friends with people who are serious with everything.” – Regina, Riverview

A considerable number of students seemed to feel that their peers lacked aspiration and, at Riverview, that aspiration was not generally encouraged. This did not ring true to me and supports the idea of aspiration as a discursive technique – this will be returned to later.

Only two interviewees did not report fairly clear ideas about what they wanted to do as a career. Habiba sounded somewhat apologetic for this:

“I don’t know really. Umm, yeah, I guess I don’t know. I did use to want to be a teacher, but nah, not anymore. Behaviour’s too bad. Now I’m not too sure really. I know that’s bad.” – Habiba, Riverview

This further emphasises how having clear ideas about career paths is regarded as desirable, with a lack of clarity a position possibly requiring explanation. Chelsea, however, was unapologetic, gleefully reporting:

“I’ve never really wanted to do anything. Like, literally never. Really!” – Chelsea, St Bernard’s

However, she had very clear ambitions to attend a Russell Group university. Through what Smith (2011) describes as “intragenerational family scripts”, Chelsea’s two older sisters had provided a model of deferment until after university, and she recognised that a degree from an elite institution could open up a variety of possibilities. Chelsea’s insistence on attending an elite institution was relatively unusual, with most students subscribing to an egalitarian belief of a kind of equality amongst institutions. Whilst students often had a preferred institution, going to university was the most important thing; *which* university was of much less concern.

University choice

The history of higher education in the UK has encouraged the development of a differentiated system, with the expansion of higher education occurring via diversification, and there is an accompanying hierarchy of prestige (Egerton and Halsley, 1993). Broadly speaking, there is something of a division between pre-1992 and "new", post-1992 institutions. Generally, pre-1992 institutions have higher entry requirements, greater research budgets, and focus their teaching on "academic" courses, and this category includes the Russell Group. Post-1992 institutions are often former polytechnics, tend to have lower entry requirements, are less research intensive, and typically offer more "vocational" courses. In the context of the increased stratification of higher education institutions (Reay et al., 2005), we see new institutions predominantly catering to "non-traditional" (working-class and minority ethnic), often disadvantaged participants, and the generally more prestigious pre-1992 institutions attended by the more advantaged, "traditional" participants (Reay et al., 2010). This division is visible in admissions data, particularly in relation to the Russell Group – for example, at the time of my research, compared with non-FSM pupils living in the same neighbourhood and with similar GCSE attainment, FSM pupils were 47% less likely to attend a Russell Group university (Social Mobility Commission, 2016).

Reay et al. (2005) propose two ideal types of university chooser: the "contingent" and the "embedded" chooser. The first is typically a first-generation higher education applicant, with working-class, low-income parents. Finance is a key constraint for the contingent chooser, and choice-making draws on limited information and support, and is "distant" and "unreal". The universities under consideration tend to be local, with students intending to remain living at home. Expectations are sometimes unrealistic, and only weakly linked to imagined futures. Higher education is a general category, with neither the applicant nor their family having much sense of the different kinds and statuses of institutions. This is in stark contrast to the "embedded" chooser, whose parents attended university and where higher education is the expected route into adulthood, with attendant support given to assist in choice – families are able to mobilise all of their capitals to support the young person's application process. For the embedded chooser, the type and status of the university is important, and finance is no constraint. Choice is based on extensive, diverse information, comprising what, in relation to parental choice of secondary school, Ball and Vincent (1998) dubbed both "hot" and "cold" knowledge – or the use of "grapevine" alongside "official" information. Reay et al. propose that

middle-class young people's understanding of the right kind of university is "ingrained, tacit, taken for granted" (2005: 33), with the established middle classes "the virtuosos of university choice" (ibid: 71).

The majority of students at both St Bernard's and Riverview closely met the description of the contingent chooser, with one key difference being that many reported having long expected that they would attend university – for Reay et al.'s contingent chooser, this decision was typically recent, made after GCSEs. Although the lifting of the cap on tuition fees did not seem to have deterred students from applying for university, finance – and the desire to minimise debt – was a key concern for many students. One of my interviewees and a number of other students I encountered over the course of my research were not prepared to take student loans, considering them haram because of the interest charged. This meant parents making enormous sacrifices to raise funds, and these young people anticipated working a large number of hours throughout their degrees. For these students, financial considerations, including travel costs, were the primary concern. Whilst there are many possible reasons to choose to remain living at home, including the prioritising of local social and kin networks (Christie, 2007), financial reasons were most commonly cited by those students choosing to apply only to local universities. This led to some unusual application patterns, with students applying to both world-leading and very low-ranking institutions (such as, for example, both LSE and London Metropolitan University), demonstrating the effects of limiting choices to the local, even in an educationally "rich" region like London.

Students recognised that there was a large amount of information available to support choice-making. However, this was positioned as overwhelming, and students generally used a limited range of information, often only (quite briefly) consulting university published information, on websites and in prospectuses. Relatively few students visited more than one university, if they visited any at all prior to applying. This meant that they also lacked what Slack et al. (2014) describe as "warm" knowledge: information provided by previously unknown university students, particularly on open days. Whilst most students at both institutions were aware of league tables and may have consulted these, they did not necessarily fully understand the implications of an institution's league table position – indeed, I have encountered many students who have been positively offended to learn of the widespread belief that not all degrees are equal, Tyrone being one such example.

Tyrone, a mixed-race, working-class student at Riverview had received slightly disappointing AS grades but had "negotiated" – as much using his considerable charm as his effort in Key

Assessments – strong predicted grades for use on UCAS. This might have suggested an understanding of the different statuses of universities and a desire to gain access to a more selective one. However, when we spoke about his choices, it became clear that this was not the motivation at all. In fact, his driving force was his concern about his mother "whooping his ass" (metaphorically, he assured me) if he was not predicted As and Bs. Tyrone had applied to study a natural sciences degree, and had received offers from universities including Imperial College London, a world-ranking institution, but had chosen University of Surrey as his Firm Choice. When I expressed surprise that he would choose University of Surrey over Imperial, he was confused: he had visited University of Surrey (the only university he had visited) and liked it, so why wouldn't he choose to go there? When I attempted to explain the possible greater value of a degree from Imperial – that this would improve his prospects further – he was faintly outraged, and shaking his head and laughing, argued, "That's just snobbish, Miss. No, no, no: a degree's a degree. It doesn't matter where you get it from, it's your degree."

Tyrone's perception of my social class, along with his knowledge that I was undertaking a PhD, may have been implicated here in his claim that I was being "snobbish". However, he also seemed to sincerely believe that all degrees are or should be regarded as of equal value. Other students, whilst accepting that some kind of institutional hierarchy *may* exist, rejected it as largely meaningless. This was in part because of variations between league tables and the at-times-misleading claims made by university marketing. This is especially problematic for students lacking the "intrinsic" knowledge of middle-class applicants, and a number of students expressed their frustrations with the complexity of decoding this information. It became apparent to me that students at St Bernard's and Riverview did not necessarily understand that league tables exist in a symbiotic relationship with a university's reputation and that the league table position of the university attended provides some indicator of the esteem in which an individual's degree will be held – i.e., the legitimacy or the exchange value of the institutionalised cultural capital. Rather, many of these "non-traditional" university applicants seemed to think that league table position indicated the characteristics of a university associated with their likelihood of gaining good honours, and that these then held equivalence – i.e., that a 2.1 degree is the same regardless of the awarding institution, as is the case within a standardised assessment system such as A-levels. This lack of insight into the importance accorded to the awarding institution had an impact on students' choice of institution, with other factors prioritised over university status or ranking. This also potentially had implications for A-level achievement, an issue that will be returned to.

As I have outlined, St Bernard's and Riverview students had aspirations in a range of directions, but higher education participation was a key feature of their plans for their futures. Brown (2013) argues that in the context of the neoliberal politics of aspiration, higher education is promoted as the most appropriate route to achieving social mobility, and this is apparent from the accounts of the young people involved in my research. It has largely been understood that university is the "natural", taken-for-granted destination for young people from middle-class backgrounds, but not so for working-class students (Archer et al. 2007; Smyth and Banks, 2010). Ethnicity is clearly implicated in the high rates of progression to higher education at St Bernard's and Riverview: since 2007 minority ethnic students have been more likely to go to university than their White British peers, and these differences are larger within London (Crawford and Greaves, 2015). Students' relatively consistent reporting of clear aspirations may be because they have long been encouraged to think about their "future selves" and possible careers, or may be more "symbolic", an issue that will be returned to later. However, the notion that educational underachievement and failure can be explained in any simplistic way by students' low aspirations simply does not ring true for these students.

Influences on aspirations

Family

As a Bourdieusian analysis would anticipate, much research emphasises the importance of families in shaping young people's academic and career aspirations (e.g., Archer et al., 2014; Berrington et al., 2016; Scandone, 2018). All interviewees described strong familial support for their attending university – indeed, several interviewees suggested that, from their parents' perspective, university was non-negotiable. Modood (2004) explores the phenomenon of high minority ethnic higher education participation, noting that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital fails to explain this. Modood proposed the concept of "ethnic capital" to help explain how minority ethnic groups "drive through" the disadvantages that they face. Ethnic capital consists of three dimensions: familial adult-child relationships, the transmission of aspirations, and attitudes and norms enforcement. From participants' accounts, we can see the operation of this triad.

Despite Regina's claim earlier on in the interview that her mother had little understanding of the UK education system and had been relatively uninvolved in her education, in part because of not speaking very much English, her mother *was* adamant that she should go to university:

"*My mum always told me I have to go to university, whether I want to or not: it's compulsory, it's not a choice.*" – Regina, Riverview

Tara described her mother as being relatively laid back, and it seemed that they had a close, warm relationship. Whilst her mother was generally supportive of her choices, she had intervened when Tara wanted to leave St Bernard's to attend a college, and she was clear that she expected Tara to go to university after school:

"*It's like, not an option not to go* [laughing] – *I'm being serious! Have you heard of the Open University? Yeah, my mum's doing uni with them now, but it's really hard, so she's like 'You have to go now, go whilst your young'. Since I started secondary, she's been like 'you have to go uni, I'm telling you, Tara, you've got to go uni.'*" – Tara, St Bernard's

Hamza described how he wanted to go to university not just to please his parents (primarily his father), but also his grandparents:

"*I really want to go to university right now. I mean and you know for my grandparents as well. For my Dad, that's one thing. My grandparents you know they're I could say they're at their last stages sort of thing. There's a lot happening there. So, I want them to see me at university or doing something successful in some way that they would find successful and that is also another motivating factor that contributes to where I want to be*." – Hamza, Riverview

As well as encouraging students towards higher education, a number of students described parents exerting influence on their choice of degree, towards the more vocational – that is, degrees leading to a professional qualification, or oriented towards business, for example. Most female interviewees reported their parents having provided some input or played a role in their choice of degree course or of their career aspirations:

"My mum's trying to push me towards law but I don't want to do it. I think with African parents they think you can either be a lawyer, a doctor, or teacher. She holds it to such a high idea, she's like 'just do it it'd be good'. Like all my friends, their parents are the same – who are African. But the ones who aren't, their parents don't really care what they do. She cares, but she won't force me." – Habiba, Riverview

"Because I'm good at maths, my mum, she said 'you should do accountancy'. She wants me to have a good job after." – Alexandra, Riverview

Fawzia's parents influenced her original aspiration to become a doctor, it emphasised that a career in medicine brought with it respectability and prestige:

"'I'll stick with Medicine because my parents want me to do medicine. I think it's more of a stereotypical kind of thing. Especially Somali parents. And I think it's not even Somali parents, it's just a lot of cultures, their parents – it's kind of good pay, you do well. It's very big. It's like 'wow, you're a doctor, you're capable of like curing me, just wow'. It's like society thinking of doctors and stuff." – Fawzia, Riverview

However, having achieved average GCSEs, she realised that medicine was not likely to be an option for her, and researched medicine-allied options, settling on pharmacy:

"And I was like 'Ah, I enjoy this, I actually really want to do this'. And I told my parents and my parents were completely fine with it. My mum was happy like. I think they were more happy that I actually want to do something like. It's actually a good course that's gonna help me out in the future, and it's going to benefit my family as well."

On deciding that pharmacy was an appealing career option for her, she "checks" this with her parents and explains their contentedness in terms of how her chosen career path will benefit her family – this may have been particularly important given that Fawzia was not intending to take out student loans.

Interestingly, not a single one of my male interviewees reported this influence on their choice of subject or career. This may reflect gendered childrearing differences, with parents more likely to communicate their expectations or wishes to daughters than to sons, or may reflect performances of masculinity whereby boys were less likely to acknowledge parental influence, wanting to present themselves as independent – particularly in the context of a discussion with a young, female interviewer:

"I decide what I want to do" – Fahim, St Bernard's

"They just let me go my own way really" – Dawit, Riverview

Many students drew on their cultural backgrounds to explain their parents' aspirations for them, suggesting that their culture was implicated in their parents' orientation towards higher education and professional careers for them, with both law and medicine held in particularly high esteem – perhaps unsurprising, given the recognised preference among some minority ethnic groups for "known" or safe routes as a strategy for guaranteeing success (Archer and Francis, 2007). Students' accounts support the influence of ethnic capital in shaping their aspirations. Whilst ethnic capital can be conceptualised as a form of social capital (Modood, 2004), it can be seen to differ from the social capital held by "traditional" higher education participants in that it may orient young people towards a different set of choices. For example, Jamila was explicit about minority ethnic, working-class students making "safe" choices because of an understanding of what she saw as a *lack* of social capital, and she seemed somewhat envious of her more advantaged peers:

"*[It's about] culture. And mainly because you're told you're not gonna have any opportunities don't do anything, like if you do something else. I think also like, to a certain degree, that's true. Because when I went to the other school* [a grammar school sixth form] *I was like, okay, I've realised all of you guys are doing subjects at uni that you actually want to do. Because you will eventually – you have parents who are going to make connections for you, whereas us, we don't. So, we're kind of told do a vocational degree because you'll have a definite job after if that makes sense. But so I'm stood there I was like, okay, so that's why we all do vocational degrees, it's because it'll guarantee you either a job and you don't have to go through the hassle of being unemployed for a bit. And then, you know, but it's, I under- I really saw that, I really saw why we would always be told to do degrees like Medicine*." – Jamila, Riverview

Maruan expressed concern about racism in the labour market, with even a master's degree from an elite institution not guaranteeing a job:

"*My cousin got into King's College... Right now, he even told me he went to his interview place in a big company. They took him in for it, passed all the stages, but because his name was Mohammed, and because they thought he was taking this job interview as a joke, they said to him we can't accept you. He asked them for a reason, and they said we thought you'd come here just to test it out. He was like, no. Why would I come here, spend my time and then test it? He's having already serious problems. But again, I understand. Even though you've got a degree and your Masters, it's still going to be very hard to get into a job*." – Maruan, Riverview

Such concerns had steered Maruan towards an economics degree, which he hoped would provide him with good prospects for employment.

It has been noted that a lack of familial resources means that working-class students operate more independently in their choices around higher education (Reay, 1998b). Whilst providing encouragement and supportive of higher education participation, most participants felt that their parents were unable to provide them with meaningful support in the application process or regarding their choice of university, for example. This was because very few parents had been through higher education in the UK, and many did not speak English. However, parents did often seek to exert influence on students' choice of university: parents were overwhelmingly keen for their children to stay in London for university and remain living at home. This was both out concern for the amount of debt they would graduate with and because of cultural sensibilities, particularly in relation to girls moving away.

The role of the school/college

Research has identified a "school effect" or the influence of institutional habitus: particular educational institutions influence students' decisions around higher education (Reay et al., 2001). Reay et al. (2005) note that, as well as the curriculum offer and organisational practices, institutional habitus comprises the "less tangible but equally important cultural and expressive characteristics" (37). Institutional habitus influences how higher education is constructed and discussed between staff and students, and between students themselves. As well as affecting whether university is regarded and presented as the inevitable next step, institutional habitus may also encourage the favouring of particular institutions (Smyth and Banks, 2012), as could be seen at St Bernard's.

London has gone from being a low- to a high-participation region for higher education, and young people in London are significantly more likely to enter higher education than their counterparts across the rest of England (UCAS, 2017). This is, of course, in part about ethnicity, but it may also be that, as more of their young people apply, schools and colleges in London have developed institutional habituses oriented towards the expectation that their students apply to university. Despite serving largely working-class communities, progression to university was absolutely part of the institutional habitus of both Riverview and St Bernard's. The vast majority of the students who feature in my research were first-generation university applicants. This is likely to make the school attended particularly influential, with first-

generation university applicants more likely to be reliant on their schools for specific knowledge regarding higher education (Smyth and Banks, 2012).

Although students entered Riverview with relatively low average prior attainment, and results had long been quite poor, an institutional habitus of higher education participation had developed in part as a result of the efforts of the principal, employed to turn around a faltering college. One of the flagship activities of the College was a university "insight" programme involving after-school taster sessions to which students from across the borough were invited (these non-Riverview students representing the majority of attendees). An emphasis on higher education had become a core element of Riverview's "offer" to students. Students entered St Bernard's sixth form with higher prior attainment, and it was apparent from the sixth form's prospectus and website that a key responsibility of the sixth form team was supporting university applications. As well as histories of higher education application that meant that university progression had become part of the "natural order" of things, the orientation of institutional habituses towards higher education was made apparent through both visible symbols and higher education-oriented activities.

In terms of visible symbols that contributed to the institutional habitus, a large poster map of the United Kingdom with yellow stars marking the location of each of the Russell Group institutions was prominently displayed in the sixth form centre study area at St Bernard's. Through this, the school communicated that these were where students should be aspiring to study, and Russell Group institutions were often presented as, unequivocally, "the best" (with the highest ranking of them, in the school lexicon, "the best of the best"). St Bernard's strongly encouraged – indeed, arguably, coerced – all of their A-level students to apply to at least one Russell Group institution. All but one student (who was applying for a construction management degree not offered by Russell Group institutions) submitted to this, even where their grades meant that they were weak – or completely unrealistic – applicants. Encouraging all students to apply to at least one Russell Group university seemed, to me, aimed at satisfying the school's headteacher and, possibly, governors, as opposed to serving the best interests of students, for whom, in many cases, this would represent a wasted application. At Riverview College, as students entered the building, they were greeted with a large display board: "Students who attended top universities in 2016". Rather than distinguishing those who entered what might reasonably be thought of as "top universities" (an issue to be returned to later), in actual fact, this listed the name and destination of every single student who entered higher education that year. However, most students probably did not pause for long enough to identify

this. Rather, the message it conveyed was that students from Riverview applied to and gained access to “top universities” and that this was deserving of celebration.

Both Riverview and St Bernard’s offered a range of higher education-oriented activities in late year 12 and early year 13. At Riverview, the two weeks of term remaining after students had completed their AS level exams were designated “Transition Weeks”. As well as lessons, these two weeks involved compulsory, timetabled activities primarily focused on university selection and application. These included a carousel of talks on course choice, university choice, student finance, and student life, and a range of “specialist workshops” on specific areas of interest for students to select from, including engineering degrees, medicine, humanities degrees, and studying abroad. As tended to be the case at Riverview, attendance was poor. In the equivalent period, St Bernard’s held two assemblies, one delivered by the sixth form leadership team about the importance of the period in terms of students’ “next steps” and the other delivered by two representatives from a Russell Group institution, designed to demystify the application process and to “sell” the university experience. The school encouraged students to attend at least two university open days during this time and, to allow students to venture further afield for these, made available up to £50 per student to cover travel costs. This money had apparently gone largely unclaimed for the several years St Bernard’s had been offering it as students did not want, or failed to organise, to attend open days outside London.

The kinds of activities that took place at Riverview and St Bernard’s normalised the notion of university as the next step and familiarised students with the university application process and aspects of student life. However, within these activities there was relatively little opportunity for individualised IAG due to the large group sizes. Whilst valuable in terms of the provision of information, these activities were largely unresponsive to students’ individual circumstances or needs. Individualised, expert IAG needed to be actively sought as opposed to automatically provided. This was predominantly a resource issue: Riverview College had over 1,000 students and one careers adviser (plus myself, advising on higher education applications as part of my role). St Bernard’s did not have a full-time careers adviser but, rather, bought in services from the local authority, with a peripatetic careers adviser coming in for a few hours a week. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to lack access to information regarding higher education via their family or social networks (Reay et al., 2005) and would, therefore, most benefit from individual IAG. However, in my experience, deprived inner-city schools tend to be poorly placed to offer this, particularly since the 2012 changes described in Chapter 4. This issue was compounded by students often being slow to start the UCAS process, and

students then often attempted to access IAG at a point in the UCAS cycle when all resources were directed at approving and sending applications before the UCAS deadline.

St Bernard's seemed to have a reasonable degree of influence on and control over students' applications, exerted through the intermediaries of form tutors and Ms Begum, who, in December, roamed the school, plucking students from their lessons to complete or correct aspects of their UCAS applications so that they met her exacting standards. In contrast, at Riverview, form tutors seemed to have limited control – often due to their tutor periods being poorly attended – limited interest or, often, both. At Riverview there simply was not the capacity to chase individual students when so many left their applications very late: late (and often sloppy) applications were, arguably, an element of Riverview's institutional habitus and largely accepted as inevitable. The majority of applications were submitted in January, up to and beyond the traditional January 15th deadline – students did not heed warnings not to leave their applications until the last minute. Whilst earlier applications had the benefit of my scrutiny, the flood of applications that were submitted in the few days before the deadline could not be thoroughly checked in the same way. A not insignificant number of applications were submitted after the deadline, damaging (or entirely negating) students' chances of consideration for any competitive course or institution. The sheer unfamiliarity of both the higher education landscape and UCAS process meant that students often simply did not realise the degree of support that they required to successfully navigate it.

One aspect of successful navigation concerns making realistic and appropriate choices, in terms of both courses and institutions. A humanities teacher at Riverview revealed his concern regarding the possible poor fit between students' aptitudes and their aspirations, telling me:

"Every year I try and discourage students from applying for law because they're just not cut out for it, and you know that even if a university will take them, there's no way they're going to end up working as a lawyer. But without coming out and saying that, it's really difficult. I say 'do a politics degree; do something you find interesting, and if you still want to be a lawyer when you finish, you can do a conversion'. Every year I try!"

This demonstrated an understanding that a university degree may not fulfil its promise in terms of allowing students to meet their aspirations, even if this was not publicly acknowledged on an institutional level. Riverview's careers adviser, Desmond, was one of the few staff members I encountered willing to encourage students to adjust their aspirations to better reflect their level

of achievement. This was, after all, his job. However, he acknowledged that this was delicate, telling me:

"It's very difficult. They say they want to be a doctor, and you're looking at them and you're looking at their GCSE grades, and you're looking on ProMonitor [the student records management system] and you think 'no way!', but how am I going to say that? I say, 'have you thought about nursing, or you know, even radiography', but when they're adamant that they want to be a doctor, what can I say? And often it's their parents. Their parents have told them 'you're going to be a doctor' and they're all totally clueless."

From his perspective, Riverview parents had low levels of cultural capital, including in terms of familiarity with the UK education system: they were unaware of the very high grades required for, and the competitiveness of, gaining access to medical school. Research has shown that parents with lower levels of education or little experience of England's education system may make incorrect assumptions about children's progression (e.g., Bhatti, 1999) – for example, they may assume that their child simply sitting A-levels provides the kind of qualifications needed to gain access to the elite professions.

Desmond was rather less delicate when it came to students' UCAS choices. As the "UCAS correspondent" – the staff member with overall responsibility for the system – and the staff member who would report on and be held accountable for student offers and progression, he tells students:

"You say you want to go to the best? You need to think about it like this: you've got ten pounds to buy a pair of trainers. Are you going to be buying the best pair of new Nikes? No: you're going to be buying Primark. That is the situation you're in. Your grades are ten pounds, so it's not a question of 'the best': it's about being realistic."

This position – that some universities constitute "the best" and Riverview students would not necessarily be attending them – was not one espoused by many staff members. In contrast to St Bernard's, as an institution, Riverview subscribed to what Webster describes as a "post-modern" position whereby universities are different but equal, a perspective he rejects: "While the post-modern position highlights the complexities of locating universities on matrices of difference, it is an absurdity to suggest that differences are such as to subvert hierarchy or negate judgement" (2000: 324). This post-modern position was an outcome of Riverview's institutional habitus. Whilst keen to move away from its reputation as a "second chance" rather

than a "first choice" institution, this remained how Riverview was often perceived within the post-16 market. There was thus investment in the idea that lower-ranking institutions with less stringent entry requirements could still be high quality, and university choice was presented as a matter of the student finding the correct course and "fit" from a menu of equally good options. Whilst understandable that staff would not want to denigrate the kind of institutions that many of their students were likely to attend, this may have had the unwitting effect of misleading students – not all degrees are equal and, as much research (Williams and Filippakou, 2010; Wakeling and Savage, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2018) demonstrates, the university attended matters very much for entry into the kind of careers many at Riverview aspired towards.

The institutional habitus of both Riverview and St Bernard's oriented students towards higher education and, at St Bernard's, signalled the superiority of the Russell Group. However, as well as lacking capacity to provide much in the way of individualised IAG and support, there was a reluctance to provide students with information that would help them to construct more realistic imagined futures or to make choices more relevant to these. Much like secondary schools' primary concern that pupils not likely to attend their own sixth form have "somewhere to go", the collapse of the youth labour market means that sixth forms may encourage students to pursue higher education regardless of its suitability as student destinations are used by the DfE as an accountability measure. Further, staff, understandably, do not want to tell working-class, minority ethnic students to set their sights lower, or to dishearten them. However, these students *need* practical and realistic IAG – this is particularly important for students who do not necessarily have the cultural capital that provides for an understanding of the differences between higher education institutions or the realities of entering some of the professions to which they aspired.

Popular culture

Conversations about popular culture interests and tastes – for example, in relation to what television (or, more accurately, Netflix) series students were watching and music tastes – aided in establishing friendly relationships with students but were also often used as reference points in the discussion of aspirations.
Most of the young people involved in my research had few, if any, personal contacts who had been to university. This meant that television and film portrayals of university – generally American – were sources of insight into university life, and both *Gossip Girl* and *90210* were mentioned in this regard. Both are popular American drama series focused on the lives of highly

privileged teenagers, beginning whilst the central characters are in secondary school and following them through university. Whilst one student noted that these representations of university might differ from their own university experience, this was framed as being because they were *American* universities, rather than because of the characters' wealth or privilege. It struck me that students might be quite disappointed by the contrast between the fictional California University and a post-1992 London campus, and between the lives of the highly privileged fictional undergraduates and the realities of living on a maintenance loan.

As well as providing young people with representations of university, as found by other research (for example, Archer and Francis, 2007), television could help to shape career aspirations. For Katie and Simarjit, both of whom aspired to be lawyers, a good deal of their inspiration came from *Suits*, an American legal drama television series starring Meghan Markle, which they regularly petitioned me to watch. All applicants for forensic science courses (an area in which there has long been an oversupply of graduates) described being inspired by the CSI franchise, whilst students applying for business degrees often mentioned *The Apprentice*, its presenters (including, at that time, Donald Trump) and contestants cited as sources of inspiration.

A popular culture influence I had not anticipated was that of Youtube videos, mentioned in interviews by a number of Riverview students. These students described using Youtube not just for its educational content, but watching "results day" and "student life" videos to motivate them:

"*Don't laugh Naomi, but I literally watch results day videos every day… I don't know, they make me happy. They inspire me."* – Alexandra, Riverview

Most Riverview interviewees mentioned a previous student of Riverview who was, at the time, running a student life Youtube channel. His most popular videos had hundreds of thousands of views, and, when he occasionally visited the college, he was treated as a bona fide celebrity. Students described being influenced by "Youtubers" (or "Studytubers") as they saw them as relatable and providing information about university that could be trusted – what Slack et al. (2014) describe as "warm" knowledge. Unsurprisingly, Wohn et al. (2013) note that social media is of greater value in this respect for first-generation university applicants compared to those with a family history of higher education.

Television and other media are important sources of information and inspiration for young people, and may be particularly influential on the aspirations of young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Hoffner et al., 2006). Exposure to images of university and a variety of occupational roles is obviously positive. However, media images are not necessarily realistic; they often portray inaccurate or stereotypical images, and this may cultivate unrealistic perceptions and expectations (Levine and Hoffner, 2006).

Serendipity and chance

As with students' choice of A-levels, students' degree choices, institutional preferences, and career aspirations were often shaped by serendipity and chance.

Abdullah traced his interest in pursuing economics to what might have been a throwaway comment made by the teacher of his Saturday Islamic studies class:

"He asked us to all write letters of what we wanted to do, in year 9, and I said I wanted to go to university. And he was like 'oh, you want to go to university, you should go to LSE'. And that was the first time I've ever heard of LSE. And one of the people next to me, they said 'oh it's the best school in the world for economics'. And I thought 'Oh that sounds interesting', but economics, I didn't really know what it was. I didn't really know what university *was in year nine."* – Abdullah, Riverview

The Islamic studies teacher's suggestion had proved highly influential – Abdullah had gained a place on LSE's year 12 widening participation programme, the only student at Riverview who applied. It was possible (if relatively unlikely, given his grades) that he might have ended up as an LSE economics undergraduate. However, this "advice" should be understood as serendipitous: Abdullah's Islamic studies teacher did not know about Abdullah's outside interests, academic aptitude, or skills. Abdullah had placed a lot of weight on a casual recommendation from someone he did not know very well, based on his respect for this individual, whom he described as "*really clever*".

The decision to study law was, for a number of students, based more on chance than knowledge and understanding or careful consideration. Regina's aspiration to study law was based on her favourite secondary school teacher having studied law:

"Well, my history teacher studied law, and she told me, because I remember I was struggling with my career. I didn't know what to do, and I'm way more determined to do well in my GCSEs and my A-levels when I know exactly what I'm doing in my life, and I began to think about my career. And she told me that she studied law, she studied history, and then I kind of looked at law." – Regina, Riverview

Regina did not have any personal contacts who had been to university, and this teacher's degree subject seemed to have had a disproportionate influence in encouraging Regina towards a law degree.

Katie and Simarjit had been put forward for a professional mentoring programme and, randomly, each had been assigned lawyers as mentors. Katie had met her mentor once, and Simarjit had exchanged a couple of emails with hers. They had not got as far as really learning anything from their mentors, but their brief communication with them (along with their enjoyment of *Suits)* was enough for them to have decided that they wanted careers in law. All of these students were vague about what either a law degree or career actually entailed, but were, nonetheless, completely committed to this route.

As well as degree choices and career aspirations, institutional preferences were similarly often somewhat down to chance – a cousin had mentioned that the university was good for a particular subject, or a learning mentor recommended it – and this single piece of information informed students' choice. Other research has found a preference for "hot" knowledge among working-class groups (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay et al., 2005), this despite their having less access to what might be considered valuable or well-informed hot knowledge regarding universities or careers. This can be seen in the young people's reliance on personal recommendations as opposed to, for example, careers guidance or resources. Whilst this can sometimes turn out favourably – for example, Abdullah had developed a genuine interest in economics and had taken steps to improve his chances of gaining a place at LSE – there is also the risk that the reliance on hot knowledge means that students end up with "limited and confused information and misinformation" (Hutchings, 2003: 106). This can circulate and become "common sense" – for example, several students told me that they would not apply for Queen Mary because the student population was "all Asians".

Motivations and explanations

Mobility, respect(ability), and helping others

A discourse of mobility – social and spatial – saturated students' accounts of their aspirations: they intended to be upwardly mobile, and most desired to leave London.

Several students made reference to their own or their parents' country of origin and their extended family in countries in the Global South, noting the far greater opportunities that they had as a result of being educated in the UK. This they described as motivating them to ensure that they made use of the opportunities that they had been given – they had a responsibility to be socially mobile. Several interviewees noted that their (immigrant) parents had not had the opportunity for education, and there was an expectation that they would exceed their parents' educational level and occupational category:

"My parents had to leave [Eritrea] *and there wasn't much opportunity anyway, so they don't really have much education. So I want to make sure that I do. And, yeah, get a better kind of job"* – Dawit, Riverview

Maruan reflected on the lack of opportunities for young people in his extended family in Morocco:

"*The only future is probably working with your dad in a shop or probably working with one of your cousins, if they accept you… Once there are tourists, there's a lot of money coming into the country, but that's only summertime. But during the winter and autumn, they're financially very poor. But at the end of the day, they still, these kids are like, my cousin is almost 19, one year older than me, but he wants to become something big in Morocco, he wants a future, but his future is actually restricted, because of what he has… His income is limited; if your parents are not wealthy you can't really get into the best university. And the university places there, they're all right and good, but they're not, they don't give you the opportunity to open doors… So, there's a lack of resources in the country, I can see that, that's why the education level is not that high and that's why people don't get into the best universities in Morocco and aren't able to succeed. Again, that helped me understand that once you've got this education in this country for free and you're able to go to a public school, it's important that you work hard and do well.*" – Maruan, Riverview

Maruan's comments demonstrate the extent to which a university education is positioned as absolutely central to mobility.

Amy, a highly capable student, had a range of ambitions for the future. Reflecting on these, she said:

"Like I don't wanna be working so hard to get As to just be like- earning a high salary, but I'm just the manager of like Aldi. Like as in I want to do something which is substantial to my life. Like you can get good money- like when I was reading the graduate jobs in like Aldi, if you're a manager in Aldi you get like forty something grand, and they give you a car. That is so good: you'd be like rich, but I wouldn't feel like I was successful. If people asked me where I work, I'd have to be like 'I work at Aldi'. If they need me to stack a shelf, I'm going to have to do it... I wanna bump into someone from primary school and not stop talking about how great I am. I wanna be proud of what I've achieved. I wanna be proud of myself basically." – Amy, Riverview

Amy is from a working-class, single-parent background, and several of her siblings were in or had experienced prison. She was aware of how her family were perceived and described herself (quite cheerfully) as "looking like a chav", a figure that has become the visible symbol of class disgust in contemporary Britain (Tyler, 2008). Whilst Amy claimed to reject the negative judgments of others, she seemed to feel a lack of respect, which, as Sennett (2003) notes, can be as wounding as an insult. Her comments about supermarket work were particularly poignant because her mother worked in Sainsbury's. Amy was clear that, even in a managerial position, above that of her mother's, she aspired to more than working in a supermarket. Depressingly, over the course of my research, a number of students mentioned secondary school teachers warning them that, if they did badly at school, they would end up "stacking shelves", this seemingly a shorthand for failure. Amy desired others' respect – and to feel deserving of self-respect – and this was to be achieved through gaining a degree and a career accorded status.

Katie worked part-time in the same hospital café in which her mother worked full-time and was clear that she wanted different kind of work in the future:

"I want a job where I wear heels and a pencil skirt to work, and I want to be able to afford nice handbags, a nice car…" – Katie, St Bernard's

Katie wanted to be a lawyer, and, for her, "*heels and a pencil skirt*" were clearly symbolic of professional work in an office environment. However, this account was also about wanting to

appear different – what one of the women in Skeggs' (1997) classic study might deem "respectable". Walkerdine (2003), too, notes the role of the "makeover" in working-class women's upward mobility.

In discussing her aspirations, Tara also linked appearance, respectability, and mobility:

"Maybe law, maybe – can you see me on TV? I could be a TV presenter, maybe a lawyer, maybe go into business. Whatever, what I know, I am telling you, I am not gonna be one of those ratchet girls with lopsided weaves still working in New Look." – Tara, St Bernard's

In Tara's mind, it seemed that these characteristics – bad hair and retail work – were in some way linked, and she was determined to rise above these women.

In the course of discussing aspirations and plans for the future, most of my interviewees reported wanting to live outside London when they were older. This interested me both because I am a deeply committed Londoner and because opportunities are concentrated in London. Most of those who aspired to leave London were vague about the alternative places that appealed to them, or named places that they had never visited, but were adamant that they would like to live somewhere "more quiet" or "less hectic":

"I think I'll probably start in London career wise because it's where the best firms are but once I've established myself, once I'm known, then I think I'd like to go somewhere else. Because traffic's so bad, it's so hectic. Everyone says rent's really expensive – like 'woah, are you serious?'. I can see myself living somewhere a bit more quiet." – Ibrahim, Riverview

"*I think maybe [I'd live in] Canterbury. Have you heard of it? My cousin goes uni there and my aunt says that it's really nice – it's more calmer than London but it's still got everything you need*." – Tolu, St Bernard's

For some, the desire to leave London appeared to be about concerns around safety or the environment – for example, several students noted that they suffered from asthma and wanted cleaner air. However, for others, in contrast to other research that found young people from working-class backgrounds to experience a "stickiness" of place (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013), spatial mobility seemed to be part and parcel of their desire for social mobility. Whilst these students were, on the whole, planning to remain within their locale for university, their more temporally distant aspirations were geographically distant. However, these aspirations also had

a distant and unreal quality, suggesting that they may have been discursive, communicating the desire to transcend their current conditions.

Many students made some reference to wanting to help others through their careers, and this also came through in interviewees' accounts in relation to careers beyond the "helping professions":

"*Engineers have a really important job. They can really help people. For Science Week, in year 10 I think, we had an engineer come in and speak to our class and he said that engineers save more lives than doctors – really, think about it, they keep the bridges up! And Miss, have you heard of Doctors Without Borders? They go into warzones and that. There's one for Engineers too. So, I think with engineering, the pay's good, but you can also help people."* – Paul, St Bernard's

"I want to be an economist. Maybe something in Eritrea, my country. I dunno, it's not in a good shape right now. And I guess people are just tired. And it seems quite ambitious, or really ambitious; but I want to do something to change to change the current situation. And I haven't figured out how to do that now, but it's something I want to do." – Dawit, Riverview

"I think that it would be really special to be able to help out like that. Women always remember their midwife because giving birth – you're there to help women out at that time and I'd really like that." – Tolu, St Bernard's

This can be understood not just as altruism, but the desire to be valuable within society. We might also understand this as discursive: Frye argues that young people use "idealized visions of their future selves to ascribe significance and moral stature to their present selves" (2012: 1573), and this can be seen in how the young people in my research explained their aspirations.

Money, and being known

Unsurprisingly, earning a good salary was of concern to many of the young people involved in my research. However, this did appear to be gendered, and it was more frequently boys who expressed a desire to earn particularly high amounts or to be rich:

"I'm not gonna lie, Miss; I wanna be earning dough*."* – Alistair, St Bernard's

In discussing his aspirations for the future, Ibrahim explicitly referenced class and having grown up "*not exactly rich*". He spoke about being particularly interested in criminal law but acknowledged that this was a difficult area in which to earn a high salary, and that this would be a priority for him:

"Well I'm not exactly from the highest class, most wealthy background, and yes, I do think I want to make good money, so I'll probably look at corporate law"- Ibrahim, Riverview

A large number of male students reported aspiring to careers in the City, motivated largely by wanting to earn high salaries, and many could reel off the starting salaries for roles at different banks and firms, often quoting amounts that I thought sounded quite ambitious for students who would be attending medium- and low-ranking universities. Indeed, as found by other research (Mendick et al., 2015; Hoskins and Barker, 2017), those who valued becoming wealthy believed that hard work and motivation would be sufficient to achieve this and did not recognise the role that class advantages (including particular kinds of educational achievement) may play in determining success or otherwise, as convincingly demonstrated by Friedman and Laurison (2019).

There have long been complaints about young people being "celebrity obsessed". In 2008, Mary Bousted, the General Secretary of what was then the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, released a statement in response to a survey of teachers that found that many felt that their pupils' greatest aspiration was to be famous. Bousted stated, "We are deeply concerned that many pupils believe celebrity status is available to everyone. They do not understand the hard work it takes to achieve such status and do not think it is important to be actively engaged in school work as education is not needed for a celebrity status."(BBC, 2008). In 2012, Conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith claimed that "get rich quick" attitudes and a "celebrity culture" that "celebrates all the wrong people" had damaged young people and contributed to the 2011 riots (Wintour and Lewis, 2012). More recently, there have been a number of articles suggesting that making a living from Youtube fame is now young people's preferred career choice (e.g., London and Cliff, 2014; Young, 2019). Overall, celebrity culture tends to be positioned as a "damaging influence that erodes young people's aspirations and fuels unrealistic expectations" (Mendick et al., 2018: 14).

A number of young people described wanting to be famous or be "known". However, this was usually about achieving career success, and becoming known within their community or their profession:

"I'd really like it if, like, everyone knew – everyone I went to school with, my parents' friends, everyone knew that they could come to me and I'd be able to help them out." – Fawzia, Riverview

"*Well obviously, I'd like to be a big name in it* [advertising], *maybe even have my own company, with my name in it."* – Lejila, St Bernard's

Hamza's secondary school had featured an "Alumni Wall of Fame", featuring among others, a premier league footballer and a television presenter. He spoke of wanting to one day feature on this wall himself:

"I wanna be there, I wanna do more, I wanna make it there faster if anything. But yeah, that's my aim, so that's like a highlight, like trying to be an alumni." – Hamza, Riverview

He was hopeful that this would happen through the achievement of his primary aspiration of making it as a successful actor but, having applied for an economics degree, was also content to make it onto the wall through becoming a successful business leader.

Amy was the only interviewee who seemed interested in celebrity status:

"Like deep down I'm like a singer, rapper, songwriter. Oh my God, like, I just wanna be a superstar!"
– Amy, Riverview

However, this desire co-existed with other aspirations, including an interest in joining the police force, and owning her own business. The young people who feature in this research bore little resemblance to the fame-obsessed teenagers of the social imaginary.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the high aspirations of A-level students at St Bernard's and Riverview College. However, these high aspirations do not necessarily lead to high achievement; indeed, they co-exist with underachievement and failure. Why is this?

Firstly, the notion that "aspirations" can act as what St Clair et al. (2013) describe as a "silver bullet" is a false promise. Much research has found that aspirations among many disadvantaged groups are very high – indeed, higher than the labour market can support (Baird et al., 2008; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; St. Clair et al., 2013). I agree with Archer et al. when they suggest that "raising aspirations" is "an unfair social enterprise – impelling all children to aspire to prizes that (due to the way the game is set up), only the privileged few are likely to attain" (2014: 77). It is important to note here that the students who feature in my research were students who chose to remain in post-16 education and study for A-levels, and their aspirations were likely to have played a role in this. Critiquing the supposed relationship between aspirations and educational outcomes is not to deny *any* role for aspirations. However, evidence suggests that, for this group, aspiration interventions are inappropriate as a means to address education inequalities. High aspirations may be necessary for achievement but are clearly not sufficient for it.

Secondly, the aspirations of the young people in the research were often somewhat disconnected from their skills and academic achievement, something noted by some staff members at Riverview. Low levels of cultural and social capital meant that young people had little understanding of the careers to which they professed to aspire and did not recognise the competitiveness of gaining entry to them, for example. A lack of understanding of the different statuses of universities meant that many students were effectively being misled regarding the likely value of the degree that they would obtain. Without the cultural capital to distinguish between different universities, students did not necessarily aim towards those with high grade offers. Because the student places cap has been abolished, many universities are more generous regarding missed conditional offers than they were in the past, and this has filtered through to A-level students. Further, as McInerney (2015) notes, "universities are handing out unconditional offers like confetti", which, when getting to university is the overriding aim of many students, provides little incentive for them to do well at A-level. All of this means that high aspirations do not necessarily drive achievement.

Finally, aspirations should be regarded as performative: they serve a particular purpose within a specific context (St. Clair and Benjamin, 2011). This is not to suggest that professed aspirations are baseless or trivial but, rather, that they should be understood as connected to identity formation. In the context of a broad political rhetoric of meritocracy, to fail to aspire "is aggressively positioned as an abdication of responsibility" (Littler, 2013: 66). High aspirations allow a young person to demonstrate that they are of substance, that they have value. Without the necessary cultural capital required to excel academically, gaining success in the present,

young people invest in being aspirational, this becoming a central statement of who they are and want to be.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the "problem" of A-level underachievement in Inner London, where GCSE achievement is better than average, but A-level achievement worse.

My research set out to answer the following questions:

1) What are inner-city students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, and how do these differ from GCSE?

2) What are the factors shaping these students' engagement with and achievement at A-level, and what role might class, ethnicity, and gender play?

Using an ethnographic approach, I undertook fieldwork at a school sixth form and a sixth form college and interviewed students who had underperformed or whose predicted grades were below what would be expected according to their GCSE grades. My research draws on and contributes to the sociological literature on differential educational achievement. It makes an original contribution to the literature through the focus on A-level achievement – a neglected stage – and the consideration of how students' cultural capital, prior educational experiences, and experiences of teaching and learning shaped their engagement and achievement at A-level. This chapter will pull together my research findings to address the above questions.

What are inner-city students' experiences of teaching and learning at A-level, and how do these differ from GCSE?

Many students had quite mixed experiences of teachers and teaching, and students experienced a range of challenges in relation to teaching and learning at A-level. A large number of Riverview students seemed to have been badly let down by staffing problems at both Riverview and, often, their previous sixth forms, this meaning frequently cancelled classes and changes of teacher – problems that had been much less common at GCSE. These experiences were underpinned by the problem of teacher shortages which is likely to be most acutely felt in disadvantaged settings. Students also reported experiencing unplanned lessons, which resulted in wasted classroom time and, at both sixth forms, a range of pedagogic practices that they found unhelpful. This is rather more difficult to account for but could be influenced by teacher morale,

workloads, and institutional habitus. Overall, students expressed preference for "visible" pedagogy that was responsive to their learning; what has been described as "mixed pedagogy".

The sixth form experience is characterised by greater freedom and the expectation of greater individual responsibility. Whilst students enjoyed the greater freedom of sixth form (and resented efforts to impinge upon this freedom), many recognised that they did not necessarily treat their enhanced freedom with the expected responsibility. This meant that students missed lessons, rarely used free periods in the way that they were intended, and often did not engage in nearly as much independent academic work as was expected. Many students expressed that it was possible to achieve at GCSE with relatively little independent effort beyond the classroom: effectively, teachers were responsible for their learning. At A-level, students needed to take responsibility. Many students struggled with independent academic work. This was particularly evident in relation to certain kinds of activities, such as notetaking and research – activities that, I argued, require and reward cultural capital to a greater extent than more boundaried tasks, such as maths problem sets.

Students described the experience of A-levels as, variously, "*overwhelming*", "*surreal*", and "*too much*", and that it was "*unrealistic for them to assume that 17- and 18-year-olds can do that in two years, and still get good grades, and still be okay mentally".* Students experienced the volume of content, pacing, and academic difficulty as very challenging, as was the level of independent work that was expected of them. Overall, it seemed that the greater freedom of sixth form entails greater freedom for students to underachieve and, for some, to fail.

Students identified a number of differences between their experiences of teaching and learning at GCSE and at A-level. All of my interviewees experienced a lengthened Key Stage 4, providing significant additional classroom time for GCSE study. Further, many students identified that they had been "spoon-fed" at GCSE – that is, taught to the test. Most, but not all, students identified that A-levels presented considerably greater academic challenge than GCSEs. Many students expressed that at GCSE, not much effort was required to "succeed" – that is, to achieve the grades necessary to progress to A-level – whilst it was *"very impossible"* to take the same approach at A-level.

I suggested that, in the years since London Challenge, many successful London schools serving disadvantaged intakes have reoriented their pedagogic practices to facilitate students' GCSE success. Considering the different elements of instructional discourse identified by Bernstein (2003a), the selection, organisation, pacing, and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received is carefully calibrated to try and ensure that students perform well in their GCSE

examinations. However, this comes at a cost, and these largely working-class and minority ethnic students experienced a very narrow curriculum: these students, who have the least access to the cultural capital that is rewarded within formal education, are, thus, less able to acquire this during secondary school. Further, the additional classroom time and the pedagogic strategies employed mean that students do not necessarily develop the academic skills – or the "scholarly habitus" – that will be required to achieve at A-level.

What are the factors shaping these students' engagement with and achievement at A-level, and what role might class, ethnicity, and gender play?

As I have shown, a wide range of factors influenced St Bernard's and Riverview students' engagement and achievement at A-level. These include the institutional habitus of the sixth form, students' A-level subjects, their classroom experiences, relationships with teachers, students' approaches to and orientation towards independent work, and aspirations. A number of experiences, such as disliking a particular subject or teacher, whilst not unique to sixth form, took on greater significance. Cultural capital – access to which is primarily related to social class but, also, shaped by ethnic background – is highly consequential for engagement and achievement.

Through its institutional habitus, the sixth form attended may shape students' A-level engagement and achievement. Gewirtz et al. (1994) identified that parents differ in their inclination and their capacity to engage with the market, and so, too, do students, in terms of their choice of post-16 destination. Students do not necessarily exercise rational "choice" in relation to their selection of their sixth form, and some students, by dint of moderate GCSE achievement, are effectively excluded from choice – at least, if they wish to study A-levels. Students' cultural capital (including in its institutionalised form) and habitus are relevant here. A-level students tended to enrol at Riverview in the absence of alternative options, whilst St Bernard's students tended to stay on at the sixth form as the "default" choice, even where it was not necessarily suitable for them – for example, Chelsea deeply resented the dress code, and her conflictual relationships with teachers seemingly shaped her A-level subject choices. However, whilst the sixth form attended is clearly of importance, and students at Riverview and St Bernard's made below average "progress", this is not to say that students would have necessarily done better at an alternative sixth form. Prior to Riverview, Hamza, Jamila, and Ibrahim (all high achievers at GCSE) attended middle-class, high performing sixth forms, where they each significantly underachieved.

Students' A-level subjects are of obvious importance to their engagement and achievement. Students' choice of sixth form may influence their choice of A-level subjects, the institution providing the framework from which choices are made through their curriculum offer, option blocks, and entry requirements, as well as the influence of teachers. Many students chose their subjects poorly. Some apparently gave their choice of subjects little thought, whilst others were seemingly swayed by the cultural emphasis placed on STEM subjects. Others effectively had their subjects chosen for them. This may have been because, as for Maruan, "*everyone picked the courses that I wanted",* because students had difficulty making or articulating their choices during their enrolment interview, or, as for St Bernard's students, because moderate GCSE achievement meant a highly restricted selection of subjects. Students are less likely to effortfully engage if they lack the intrinsic motivation of academic interest, and some students selected subjects that were not a good fit for their knowledge or skills. Even an unsuitable subject selected as students' "fourth" subject could prove to have a damaging effect on students' A-level engagement more broadly, as was the case for Amy.

Cultural capital takes on far greater importance at A-level and was implicated in a wide range of issues raised by students. Cultural capital influenced the ease with which students accessed the A-level curriculum and their ability to make sense of (and retain) new material. Cultural capital thus supported students' capacity to manage the faster instructional pacing of A-level. Cultural capital influenced the value that students could extract from certain classroom activities, such as research tasks, and from teaching (and teachers) more generally. Cultural capital influenced their ability to "decode" teachers' feedback and what they did with it. Cultural capital may have influenced students' relationships with teachers and their ability to successfully negotiate with them over, for example, UCAS predicted grades. Cultural capital provides the "feel for the game" in terms of students' independent work and managing responsibility for their own learning.

Students' engagement in independent work is incredibly important to A-level achievement. Alongside students experiencing difficulties in managing independent work, I identified a number of contributions to students' relatively weak engagement with such work: complacency, giving up, and the avoidance of challenge. Using insights from the psychological literature on motivation, I argued that students' prior schooling and cultural capital could provide an explanation for what can be considered maladaptive approaches to academic work. Students' experiences of teaching and learning at GCSE, including spoon-feeding and the seeming priority given to performance, are likely to have shaped their learner identities. Along with fostering the sense that not much work was required outside of lessons, students' experiences may have encouraged the development of fixed mindsets or performance goals. Combined with the

challenges arising from students' lack of cultural capital, for example, this means that students may be reluctant to effortfully engage.

Whilst "low aspirations" have been proffered as an explanation for underachievement, the aspirations of students at St Bernard's and Riverview were notably high: students largely intended to go to university, and most were aiming for professional and high-status occupations. However, high aspirations were clearly not sufficient to prevent students' low achievement or failure at A-level. I have argued that students' aspirations were, in many cases, somewhat disconnected from their skills and academic achievement. Students often did not have the cultural capital to distinguish between different universities. With most students planning on staying in London for university, students frequently had unusual application patterns, applying to both prestigious and very low-ranking institutions. Thus, the aim of attending university did not necessarily drive engagement and achievement as it is possible to go to university with very low grades, particularly in the context of many universities providing "unconditional" offers. This, combined with many students' tendencies towards complacency, giving up, and the avoidance of challenge, may mean that students settle for lower-ranking institutions. Further, I suggested that aspirations can be understood as performative: young people may invest in being "aspirational" as it is rather more accessible than securing high A-level achievement.

Whilst cultural capital is central to students' engagement and achievement at A-level, where relevant, I have sought to tease out issues of ethnicity and gender. Ethnicity was implicated in students' perspectives on the curriculum at A-level. Whilst not a term that they used, a number of students' complaints suggested that they experienced the curriculum as ethnocentric, narrow, and lacking relevance to their lives. Whilst I do not want to suggest that minority ethnic students should be steered towards "race stuff" (Ali, 2020), clearly, all students would benefit from a more inclusive curriculum. Ethnicity was particularly strongly implicated in students' aspirations, both in terms of the very high proportion of students intending to progress to higher education and, in many cases, course choices. Ethnicity and gender could both be implicated in teachers' assessments of students and in student-teacher relationships. Whilst it seemed that boys and girls largely experienced similar challenges in relation to their A-levels, boys were slightly more likely to deny academic challenge and were less likely to report mental health challenges that affected their capacity to engage. Teachers were much more likely to identify "cockiness" as an explanation for male students' "complacency". The denial of academic challenge may be an outcome of the "effortless achievement" discourse, which has been associated with masculinity (Jackson and Dempster, 2009), and it is possible that boys were more concerned to provide an impression of experiencing ease with academic work. This may

mean that they were less likely to ask for help, although this is not suggested by other research (Francis, 2000; Calacro, 2011).

My findings demonstrate how students' learning careers – their experiences as they progress through education – come to shape their engagement and achievement at A-level. I have shown how some of the practices that facilitated students' GCSE success effectively served to disadvantage them at A-level. St Bernard's and Riverview students' prior schooling experiences, along with generally limited cultural capital, meant that many were ill-equipped to manage at A-level. This is not because these students were not "clever" enough for A-levels – I reject Mr Andrews' assertion that A-levels are "when true ability shows". Many of the students at both sixth forms were very "clever" – indeed, some were amongst the brightest young people I have ever met. However, their cleverness was not sufficient to prevent their underachievement or failure at A-level. Rather, I would argue that the explanation lies in these students having been let down by an education system which encourages schools to become "exam factories" (Hutchings, 2005), focused relentlessly on GCSE examination performance, and which, in so many different respects, can be seen to reward students' cultural capital. Students' secondary schooling experiences meant that few students seemed to have developed the "scholarly habitus" required for academic success as they progress through education. Further, the emphasis on achievement rather than learning may mean that they develop maladaptive orientations towards learning. Rather than it being "true ability" that shows at A-level, I think that this is where the inequalities inherent within our education system are writ large.

Limitations

Social class (or, specifically, cultural capital) has been centred in my analysis. This was not my intention and is likely to result from my own positionality along with the fact that there were few White British students in either setting. This absence of White British students meant that I lacked the confidence to make assertions about race and ethnicity without this being very apparent in either students' accounts or my own observations.

My thesis has not discussed students' material circumstances as this was not a topic emphasised in students' accounts – in fact, it was rarely mentioned at all. This is interesting in and of itself and can be interpreted as demonstrating the strength of the discourse of meritocracy. By definition, all those eligible for free school meals live in poverty, and, with the threshold set so low, many more students *not* eligible for free school meals were also likely to be living in

poverty. There were a number of episodes during my fieldwork at both sites that demonstrated to me, very starkly, the challenges faced by A-level students living in poverty. These have not made it into my thesis out of respect for the privacy and dignity of the young people involved, but I am conscious that I do not want my thesis to suggest that material conditions do not matter when it comes to student engagement and achievement. The importance of parents' economic capital has been further emphasised to me over my past couple of years working as a self-employed A-level tutor. My students have largely fallen into two categories: "private" and local-authority-funded work with looked after children and care leavers. This has seen me dashing about London, going from multimillion-pound townhouses in Marylebone to bedsits in Zone 3, and it goes without saying that the occupants attend very different sixth forms. These students then go on to sit the same exams and be assessed as if there has been a level playing field.

Concluding thoughts

My research has sought to explore and illuminate the experiences of a hitherto fairly neglected group: inner-city students who were "successful" at GCSE, achieving highly enough to progress to A-level, but had underachieved or were anticipated to do so.

So, what do my findings suggest for addressing the problem of A-level underachievement amongst students in inner-city London?

Students appear to be being disadvantaged by a shortened, two-year Key Stage 3, which narrows the curriculum and, therefore, students' breadth of knowledge. Ofsted has recently begun to be critical of this practice and, given the influence of Ofsted on school practices (Perryman et al., 2018), we might expect this to influence schools' decisions about the structuring of and time allocation for the curriculum.

Year 11 students would benefit from far greater support in choosing their post-16 destinations and selecting their programme of study. As noted in Chapter 4, schools are incentivised to offer guidance that is primarily in their own market interests, and students would likely benefit from independent information, advice, and guidance. Many students at St Bernard's and Riverview had chosen their subjects in a fairly haphazard way (or, indeed, had been steered towards particular subjects), and this had implications for their engagement and achievement at A-level. Further, I encountered many students who really had very little interest in academic study and dropped out or did not manage to gain a qualification. These students effectively wasted one to

two years and may have ended up NEET. A lack of quality, independent IAG and the continued lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways are likely implicated here.

Over the past decade, sixth forms have seen the largest reduction of funding per pupil of any sector (Sibieta and Tahir, 2021). When I first started working in a London sixth form in 2011, I was one of approximately fourteen sixth form “academic tutors”, offering one-to-one subject-based academic support during students’ free periods and after school. These roles have now gone: the school simply cannot afford them. In general, the funding squeeze that sixth forms have experienced reduces learning support, access to suitable learning materials (many schools have not necessarily invested in new textbooks since the A-level specifications changed), and the availability of pastoral support. Sixth form students in inner-city London would likely benefit from more funded guided learning hours (and, therefore, fewer free periods) and specific training in independent study skills.

Students preferred – and seemed to benefit more – from “visible pedagogy” as opposed to minimally guided instruction, where it seems, on some occasions, they were essentially left to their own devices. Whilst it is, of course, important that students develop skills for independent learning (and the mistakes of students’ GCSE years are not repeated), these need to be scaffolded for students. In line with Delpit’s lessons from “extraordinary teachers who regularly perform magic” (2006: 221), working-class students need more rather than less content, should be taught critical thinking, and need evaluative criteria to be made explicit.

I am pleased to say that, through retaking a year or specific modules, a number of my interviewees went on to do very well at A-level. It is unfortunate that the option of retaking modules is no longer available – for students to improve their grades now, they have to re-sit the entire A-level. For many students, this may not be a terribly attractive option and is likely to disproportionately disadvantage working-class students due to what can be the excessive costs of being entered for and sitting examinations as a private candidate. This is clearly an equalities issue, and the government ought to provide support for low-income students to enable them to re-sit if they choose to.

Finally, I wish to end my thesis by noting that, whilst I have found the process of writing the PhD an enormous challenge, carrying out the research was a great pleasure. The students who feature within this thesis were all, in their own ways, remarkable, and I want to stress again that the challenges that they faced in relation to A-levels were not because they lacked “ability”. I am very grateful for their candour, insight, and wit.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Topic guide and example questions

1 Background information

- To start with, could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?
- Where are you/ your family from? When did your parents come to the UK? Do your parents speak English?
- Whereabouts do you live, and who with? Do you have brothers and sisters? Do you share a bedroom?
- What do your parents do for a living?
- Did either of your parents go to university? How about your siblings?

2 Prior school experience

- Tell me about your secondary school experience.
- Was there anything you found particularly difficult at school?
- Who were your favourite teachers? Why? Who were your least favourite and why?
- Would you consider yourself to have been a “good” student? Who were the good students? What were their characteristics? Does being a good student come naturally to some people?
- How much time did you spend on your studies outside of the classroom?
- Were your parents much involved with your school/ education? In what ways?
- Do you think you did as well as you could have at school? How could you have done better? Were there any things in particular that prevented you from achieving your potential?

3 Transition to A-level

Sixth form choice and perceptions

- How did you choose your sixth form?
- What do you think of it? What do you think of the other students?
- What is the typical student here like? Are you one of those typical students?
- Is this a good place to learn?

Courses

- Why/ how did you choose your A-level courses? What did you know about your subjects at A-level when you chose them?
- Was there much help with choosing courses from your school? Did you discuss your course choices with parents/ other family members? Were there any other influences on your course choices?
- What's your favourite subject so far? Least favourite? Why?
- Do you think you made good A-level choices?

Teaching and learning

- What's different about A-levels compared to GCSEs?
- Going through each of your subjects, can you tell me what you enjoy or don't enjoy, and anything you find difficult?
- What kind of learner are you? How do you learn best? Has your approach to learning changed at all?
- When you get marked work back from your teacher, what do you do with it?
- How do you feel when you get a good/ bad grade?
- Are the teaching and learning styles different? How? How have you coped with these differences?
- What kinds of teaching/ lessons do you find most helpful? Least helpful?
- How much time do you spend studying outside of your lessons? What form does this take? Do you have a plan for how you'll prepare for your exams?
- Are you finding any particular difficulties? What do you do when you find something difficult? Is there support available to help you?
- What kinds of students are successful at A-level?
- Do you think there's anything which stops you from fulfilling your academic potential?

4 School social life

- What do you think of your social life here?
- How important to you are the social aspects of sixth form?
- Do you think your social life is helpful or unhelpful in terms of your learning and achievement?

5 Spare time

- What do you do outside of school?
- Do you have a job? How long have you had a job for? How many hours per week do you tend to work?
- Do you have any particular responsibilities at home/ for your family? Have these changed over time?
- What do you do for fun?
- Do you do anything that supports your studies?

6 Future and aspirations

- Do you plan to go to university? When did you first start thinking about university?
- What do you think you'd like to study?
- Why would you like to study that degree?
- How much do you know about university and the kinds of courses on offer?
- Do you know many people who've already been to university? Do you speak to your parents/ friends/ teachers about university?

Career

- What would you like to do after university? Do you know much about the job/ industry you're interested in?
- When did you first think about this career? What makes you want to pursue that particular career?
- Where do you imagine yourself in 2 years/ 5 years/ 10 years' time?

Appendix 2: Informed consent form

Introduction

Thank you for showing interest in participating in my research. My name is Naomi Littlejohn, and I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. My PhD is on the topic of A-level engagement and achievement among students in inner-city London, and I would like to invite you to participate in my research. Below you will find some information about my research and, should you choose to participate, your role. Please take your time to read carefully, and feel free to ask me any questions.

Purpose of the research

The aim of this research is to explore the factors that shape students' experiences of and achievement at A-level. The research focuses on inner-city London because although students in London on average do better at GCSE than students in other regions, the reverse is true at A-level. Through my research, I am hoping to get behind the statistics and explore the experiences and views of young people studying for their A-levels in inner-city London.

Details of your involvement

If you agree to participate, I will be asking you questions about your background; your experiences of school; your transition to A-level; what you do in your spare time; and your plans for your future: I'm interested in your experiences and views, so please tell me about anything you think is relevant. You're also very welcome to ask me questions. The interview is likely to last around one hour, and our discussion will be recorded so that we can talk more freely. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can choose to end your participation at any time. I don't anticipate that we will discuss anything particularly sensitive, but you are free to refuse to answer any question. I may contact you again to clarify information or to request a further interview, and, again, this will be entirely voluntary. I hope that you will enjoy the opportunity to talk about yourself, your views, and your experiences, and to participate in sociological research.

Confidentiality

Every effort will be made to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy, and what you tell me will not be shared with others, unless I am concerned about your or another individual's safety. All data will be kept in a secure location, and all electronic information will be password protected. I will not be naming the school you attend, and all participants will be anonymised.

Contact details

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concern. Email:

Alternatively, if there is a problem, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Suki Ali:
.

Participation

By signing below, you agree to participate in this research. Your signature will indicate that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant; that you have read and understood the information provided; and that any questions have been answered satisfactorily.

________________________________ _______________

Participant signature Date

________________________________ _______________

Researcher Signature Date