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Gender, Class and Decision-Making:
A Study within an Independent
School

by
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List of Acronyms used in the Thesis

A level	Advanced Level
AS level.....	Advanced Subsidiary Level
A2 level.....	2 nd year of a 2 year A level course
GCSE.....	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDST.....	Girls' Day School Trust
GNVQ.....	General National Vocational Qualification
GPDSC.....	Girls' Public Day School Company (forerunner to GDST)
GSA.....	Girls' Schools Association
HND.....	Higher National Diploma

Abstract

There is a lack of research on the middle class in general, and especially on those who attend independent schools. This is noticeably profound in the field of educational decision-making at the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Whilst recent studies have attempted to address such issues, the focus has tended to fall on a very limited number of students attending highly selective schools, which are often based in London; and are heavily reliant on parental accounts of their offspring's decision-making.

In this study, I seek to address these identified gaps. In presenting a study of student decision-making within a non-academically-selective independent school for girls, given the pseudonym 'Midham School', which is located in a town in the Midlands of England. The study draws on observational data from Careers lessons and institutional school events such as Open Days, and students' own responses given in a questionnaire and in semi-structured small-group interviews, as well as interviews with key staff members, collected over the course of one academic year. Resulting from these, a picture will be built up of the dominant discourses relating to educational decision-making within the school and home.

Theoretically, the study addresses aspects of both structure and agency. Although there is a focus on the way in which individual young women draw on differing discourses in order to inform their agentic decision-making, these decisions are seen to be framed by structural factors such as social class, gender and academic ability. These factors are shown to have a defining effect on how the young women constructed themselves

(and were constructed) as gendered and classed individuals through the decisions that they (and their families) made regarding their education, training and future careers.

Introduction

This study explores educational decision-making at post-compulsory level (age sixteen-plus) for young women who attended a single sex independent school. In so doing, it advances a theoretical viewpoint that draws on aspects of both structure and agency, whereby young women's subjective, agentic decision-making is affected by discourses that relate to structural factors such as social class, gender and (perceived) academic ability. These discourses are prevalent both within the school and within the young women's homes and families, and have a profound effect on their lives and the decisions that they make.

It has been noted that there is a lack of research on the middle classes within education (Power, 2001), and this has particularly been the case in relation to those who attend independent schools (Gorard, 1997; Walford, 1991; 1993 and 2003a). Whilst a number of recent studies have attempted to address this gap (Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), they have tended to focus on high achieving and highly privileged students with extensive family experience of Higher Education, attending selective independent schools, particularly within the London area. Such findings enhance knowledge of the independent sector, but cannot be generalised to all independent schools, particularly non-selective schools located in non-metropolitan areas. This thesis responds to this absence by presenting a case study of a cohort of students within a single sex (girls) independent school that is not academically selective, Midham School, located in a town in the Midlands of England. At Midham, whilst some

students had considerable family experience of Higher Education, others were the first in their families to go to university. This introductory chapter provides contextual information and justification for the research, whilst also providing an overview of the contents of the chapters that follow.

Background and Context

Independent schools cater for just under 7% of the school population of the UK, and just over 7% of the school population of England (ISC¹, 2007). They are also known as ‘fee-paying’ or ‘private’ schools, although the term ‘independent’ is preferred by many such schools wishing to get away from connotations of elitism and privilege, and to emphasise their operation outside of central and local government control (Walford, 2003a). The term ‘public schools’, although sometimes used interchangeably with ‘independent schools’, in fact refers predominantly to those prestigious and highly exclusive all-male boarding schools such as Eton and Winchester, investigated by the Clarendon Commission of 1861-64, and girls’ schools such as Cheltenham Ladies’ College that are considered their equivalent. It is important to note here that such highly prestigious and selective schools are not representative of the experience of the majority who are educated in the independent sector, with all-male boarding schools such as Eton only representing a small minority of the sector (Walford, 2003a). Conversely, the independent sector is characterised by diversity rather than similarity.

¹ The ISC (Independent Schools Council) is an umbrella organisation in the UK, which is responsible for the accreditation and inspection of independent schools, as well as representing these schools’ values and interests to the government and media. It represents the majority of independent schools in the UK.

with boarding and day schools, those with a religious bias and those without, those schools that specialise in teaching students with a particular talent such as dance or music, or with conditions such as dyslexia, schools that are academically selective and those that are not. The number of students educated in each of these schools ranges from under ten to over 1000.

With average fees of £3,391 per term for an independent school (£2,707 for a day school and £6,712 for boarding school) (ISC. 2007), it is perhaps little wonder that independent education remains the experience of only a minority, with the state-maintained sector continuing to educate the vast majority of pupils in England and Wales. Nevertheless, in 2007, there were 509,093 students educated in schools which were under the representation of the ISC (ISC, 2007). With studies consistently showing the dominance of schools from the independent sector represented at top universities,² the significance of such schools in relation to issues of university entrance and participation cannot go unnoticed. Furthermore, in the post-1997 era, the Labour Party has moved from its former position of disapproval, derision and desire for the dissolution of these schools (Labour Party, 1980), to a situation where closer links are being fostered between the sectors, with the government now looking to appropriate the positive aspects of the independent sector in maintained schools (Walford, 2003a; Tapper, 2003). More generally, the growing presence of neo-liberal discourses has brought issues of educational choice to the fore (Chubb and Moe, 1997), both in the spheres of politics and educational research.

² In 2004, it was found that almost half of students at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Imperial College and the London School of Economics had attended independent schools (Sutton Trust. 2005).

Studies based overseas, such as Connell *et al.*'s (1982) comparative study of two independent schools and two state-maintained schools in Australia, and Proweller's (1998) study of an elite girls' independent school in the United States, draw emphasis to the diversity in backgrounds of students attending independent schools. However, this is noticeably less common in studies of the independent sector of education which are based in the United Kingdom. Although some studies of decision-making by parents in relation to independent schools discuss a wider range of school types (Gorard, 1997) and parents who are not necessarily from highly privileged backgrounds (Johnson, 1987; Devine, 2004), this is not the case in studies of young people making decisions at aged 16 and 18. Here, there has been a focus on privileged families, who have considerable experience of independent education and of university, and who are able to pass on their privilege and exalted social class location to the next generation (Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Correspondingly, studies of decision-making in the independent sector have tended to focus on the family, rather than on young people's own decisions. This is understandable when it is borne in mind that a lot of these studies (Johnson, 1987; Gorard, 1997; Jackson and Bisset, 2005) focus on decision-making when the young person is aged eleven or even younger.³ However, another key point of transition is the end of compulsory schooling at age sixteen (Hatcher, 1998) when young people (and their families) must decide where (or indeed, whether) to continue their education. Studies of decisions made by young people at the end of

³ Although Gorard, 1997, raises the point that even young children are often involved in the decision-making process to a certain extent.

compulsory schooling are available (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000) although these focus on the maintained sector, with few, if any, studies of the independent sector mentioning decision-making at this stage, save an assertion of the normality of staying on into the Sixth Form (Roker, 1993). Moreover, although certain studies of decision-making at the age of eighteen-plus do include accounts of those educated in the independent sector (Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), there is some reliance on parental accounts of the decision-making process here. However, young people's accounts of the decision-making process at this stage show that whilst parental support tends to be offered and is utilised by students, decisions are largely made by the young person themselves (Brooks, 2005). Consequently, a significant gap is identified in available accounts, highlighting a need to focus on young people's own decision-making at the ages of sixteen and eighteen in the independent sector.

Further to this, some studies (such as Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) oversimplify inter-class distinctions, between middle class young people whose backgrounds are highly privileged and whose families have plentiful experience of elite Higher Education, and working class students who are the first in their families to go to university. Rather, social class might be seen as altogether more complex than this, with not all middle-class young people having a family history of university attendance (Brooks, 2005). Indeed, a multiplicity of factors have an affect on decision-making, including one's family of origin, social class background, family experience of Higher Education and gender (Crompton, 1992). This indicates the necessity for a wider and more sophisticated conceptualisation of social

class and its effect on decision-making rather than a simplistic distinction between the working and middle classes.

Furthermore, certain well-known studies of middle class students and their families (see for example Reay, 1998a; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995) have been characterised by what Power (2001: 203) refers to as a ‘thinly disguised hostility’ towards the middle class. Perhaps more alarmingly, Walkerdine *et al.*, (1989) explicitly note that they felt a genuine sense of ‘hate’ for the middle class mothers in their study. This bias against the middle class in research is certainly problematic. According to Delamont (1989: 7), research on social class has been characterised by a form of ‘inverted snobbery’ whereby researchers tend to prefer to look at groups less privileged than themselves, and therefore the experiences of more privileged groups are neglected. Similarly, Proweller refers to the ubiquity of ‘studying down’ (1998:205) leading to the obscuring of other directions of enquiry, and ultimately, the mistaken assumption that majority cultures do not need to be problematised. Whilst not denying that research on underprivileged groups is highly significant, to gain a fuller understanding of class it is crucial to also consider more privileged groups. If the present Labour administration, traditionally opposed to independent schools, believes that there are things that they can learn from these schools, then perhaps it is the optimal time for carrying out research on independent schools and their methods?

Yet where the experiences of middle class groups are included in research on educational choice, they tend to be presented in a pejorative manner, as selfish and egocentric (Power, 2001). Discussion of middle

class parents' overt 'playing' of the educational system (Ball *et al.*, 1997), 'pushing' of their children to perform well academically (Reay, 1997); and of their offspring's supposedly unproblematic and natural progression into top universities (Reay *et al.*, 2005) renders them easy to dislike. This is especially the case when they are presented in contrast to a valorised working class who care more about their children's happiness than academic results (Ball *et al.*, 1997; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), and who struggle to gain places at university and adapt to its structures whilst their middle class peers are portrayed as breezing in relatively easily to top institutions (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2005). However, this is far from being the case. In fact, statistics from the Sutton Trust (2005) illustrate that only 25% of students educated in independent schools move on to the country's top 13 universities.⁴ Thus, it is important to note here that it is not the case that all students attending independent schools are highly academically successful, a point that has also been raised by Power (2001) and Power *et al.* (2003).

The aforementioned issues surrounding education and social class had a significant effect on my decision to research in this area, and on the shape that my research took. As a young woman who attended an independent school, I found the aforementioned aspects of currently available research problematic. I was the first person in my immediate

⁴ Less than 1% of students from less affluent groups who attain similar A level grades attend these universities. However, this does indicate that whilst students educated in independent schools may be more likely to attend these universities than those from less affluent groups, this is not necessarily the case for all students leaving independent schools.

family to attend an independent school⁵ and to go to university, yet when I was at school, the fact that I would go to university seemed unquestionable, and I never considered any other alternatives. Teachers within my school expected me to go to university, and my family's prioritisation of my education meant that I did the same. Thus after completing A level study and leaving school in 1998, I took up a place to study for a degree in Sociology at the University of Warwick, later following this up with postgraduate study. However, my decisions were made with none of the familiarity with the Higher Education sector exhibited by the students in Reay *et al.*'s (2005) study. I was also aware that, whilst the vast majority of my fellow students had also gone on to university, it was not in all cases a prestigious or high-ranking university. Consequently, the portrayal of the experiences of students from independent schools in the academic literature surprised me, and led to questions that form the basis of the current study.

Certainly, it is pertinent to consider some of these questions at the outset. What about those students who do not attend prestigious and highly academic schools in the independent sector, but who are lower achieving, and attend those independent schools that are less academically selective? What about those families discussed by authors such as Johnson (1987), Jordan *et al.*, (1994) and Devine (2004), who struggle to afford independent school fees, but who want their children to have the education they feel that they themselves did not have? What effect does the decision made by a family to send a child to an independent school have on the decisions that she herself will make in relation to her future?

⁵ From the ages of 7-18, I attended Nottingham High School for Girls, an academically selective independent school. Prior to this, I attended my local (maintained sector) primary school.

My study seeks to deal with these and other questions. It seeks to demonstrate how the decision to educate a young woman in an independent school might be an expression of family priorities and expectations, and furthermore, place her in an institutional situation where there are certain prevalent discourses relating to educational decision-making, and the appropriateness of particular decisions. Discourses inherent within Midham School had an important influence on how my respondents constructed themselves (and became constructed) as gendered and classed individuals through the decisions that they (and their families) made regarding their education, training and future careers. The construction of my thesis is discussed in the following section.

Thesis Structure

This section provides a brief overview of the structure of my thesis. Chapter 1 explores the currently available literature in the area of educational decision-making, with particular reference to social class and gender. Initial discussion focuses on the increased prominence in recent years of educational decision-making and marketisation, both in the context of the school and the university. This is considered in the light of perspectives that focus on the role of the individual agent in decision-making. Next, the chapter moves on to look at structural factors, specifically gender and social class, in the context of the school and the family, and the impact of these factors on the decisions which one might make. Following on from this, perspectives based around social class are explored in greater depth, in order to reject the idea of a homogeneous

middle class as has been portrayed in some of the currently available literature in this area.

In Chapter 2, discussion centres on the methodological approach taken in carrying out this research. My case study school, Midham School, is introduced, and this is followed by a discussion of issues surrounding the gaining of access, and participation in the field. The collection and analysis of my data will be discussed next, and this will be related to the concept of voice in research, and following on from this, issues surrounding the self in the research setting. Discussion of issues of voice within the research setting will lay emphasis on the foregrounding of the voices and opinions of the young women as the most accurate reflection of how their decisions about their education were made. This will lead on to a discussion of my own role within the research setting, and the inevitable effect of the embodied self on the data gathered.

Chapter 3 constitutes the first of four empirical chapters, drawing on data that I collected at Midham School in order to outline the young women's development into middle class decision-makers. It is argued that although recent policies relating to educational decision-making are characterised by undertones of neo-liberalism, individualism and freedom of choice, the role of reasoned decision-maker is available only under certain structural constraints of social class and gender. Whilst this position could be taken up by the young women educated at Midham, it was constrained by expectations relating to suitable paths to be taken by middle class young women, as conveyed to them through the school and their families. This is illustrated with the use of vignettes, showing the experiences of some of the

young women who attended Midham School. It is demonstrated that the social context in which the young women made their decisions, and the discourses inherent within it, constructed them as particular kinds of decision-making individuals.

In Chapter 4, I look at how the young women at Midham were constructed as gendered individuals, through gendered discourses occurring within the school. These discourses invoked a particular type of middle class femininity. Whilst discourses of liberal feminism and equality of opportunity were present, there were also opposing discourses of traditional femininity, linked to participation on particular types of extra-curricular activity. Whilst such discourses could be liberating for some students, ensuring their continued social location in the middle class, for others they encouraged dependency, which was potentially more problematic.

Chapters 5 and 6 move on to focus more specifically on the young women's development as 'classed' individuals, illustrating the fractions within the middle class in order to show social class to be a concept that, whilst fragmentary, remains present in these young women's lives. In chapter five, those young women whose location in the middle class was well-established will be discussed. It will be considered how for these young women, there was an automatic assumption that they would be educated in an independent school, and that they would go on to university. However, although they were expected to go to university, they had much freedom in terms of the choice of course and institution, with their continued location in the middle class assured regardless of these factors.

By contrast, those students discussed in Chapter 6 have a more liminal relationship to the middle class, with their families having little or no experience of Higher Education, and having roots that often lie in the working class. For these young women, the decision to utilise an independent school followed by Higher Education was a way to ensure their continued membership of the middle class, with a discourse of fear of ‘falling’ into the working class ensuring that they continue to strive for educational success. Their students’ decisions were thus necessarily made in a more strategic fashion than those of their peers from more established middle class backgrounds, with their structural location providing both constraint and enablement.

Pulling together the key themes raised in the previous chapters, Chapter 7 will form a conclusion to my study. This chapter reveals how my study of a non-selective, single sex school can be considered to have extended and enhanced currently available knowledge in the areas of independent education, gender, social class and decision-making. It shows how the young women educated at Midham School developed into particular kinds of gendered and classed decision-makers, through their take-up of discourses inherent in their school and within their family life. Finally, the chapter looks forward towards areas that could usefully be taken forward in further work on this area.

Before presenting the empirical findings of my research, it is crucial to position the current thesis within the framework of available literature in this field. To this end, it is to the contextual and theoretical background to the study that I now turn.

Chapter 1: Social Class, Gender and Educational Decision-Making: A

Review of the Literature

This chapter locates my research within the currently available literature in the field of educational decision-making, particularly in relation to social class and gender. In so doing, it positions my research within the wider theoretical dichotomy between structure and agency.

Initially, discussion will centre here on the increased marketisation of education in recent years, under the Conservative government of 1979-97 and, latterly, the post 1997 New Labour administration. This is tied in with neo-liberal perspectives which cite the obsolescence of structural factors such as social class in shaping people's lives, and which draw instead on theses of individualised, agentic decision-making, meritocracy, and the possibility of shaping one's own destiny. Notwithstanding this, the discussion will then move on to show the continued and profound effect of social class and gender in shaping the perceived available possibilities and the decisions made within education by young people and their families, and the concomitant effect that this has on their future social class positioning. Drawing on perspectives of both structural constraint and the agentic freedom of the individual in relation to decision-making, a perspective will be advanced of decision-making as influenced by discourses that differ according to the individual's structural location.

Following on from this, discussion will focus more specifically on social class and gender as structuring factors in decision-making. The school and the family will be considered as sites where specific social class

and gender-based discourses occur, and are imbued in the individual over time. Particular emphasis will be given here to the influence of the independent school, and of the middle class family.

However, some of the currently available studies, particularly those in the field of decision-making in post-compulsory and Higher Education, will be critiqued here, on the grounds of their failure to consider the diversity of middle class families and, specifically, those who utilise independent schools. Discussion will reveal social class to be more complex than the simple dichotomy between the working class and middle class that some studies in the field of educational decision-making have implied. It will be shown that middle class groups who use independent schools for their offspring are not homogeneous, but are rather more varied in their backgrounds, histories and practices. Their family history of connection to the middle class will be shown to be a particularly salient influence in educational decision-making processes; similarly, family experiences of education are also highly influential. This will be linked to wider sociological themes surrounding new theories of social class advanced by authors such as Savage (1995; 2003), Crompton (1992), Devine (2004), and Devine and Savage (2006). The chapter concludes by revisiting the key themes that arise from the consideration of the above areas, and subsequently looks towards the following chapters, where my own research at Midham School will be considered in depth.

Market Forces and Neo-Liberalism: Does Structure Still Have an Effect?

In recent years, there has been a rise in theses of individualism (Pahl, 1989; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) and this has been concomitant with a shift towards a consumerist agenda in educational contexts (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Pugsley, 2004) based around free markets and neo-liberal principles. This has, in turn, led to an increased focus on how individuals make decisions relating to education, training and careers. It has been argued that this emphasis on individualism in both educational policy and research has led to an obscuring of the continued effect of the relations and differences between those from different social class backgrounds (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Rather than meaning that inequality no longer exists, this leads to a ‘silencing effect’ (Skeggs, 1997), whereby such differences are ignored, and moreover, this moves the pathology away from the system itself, to become located within the individual student who fails (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Further to this, there is persistent evidence for social class-based inequality in education, with a continued association between social class background and levels of educational attainment (Halsey *et al.*, 1977; Goldthorpe, 1996), propensity to stay on in education after the age of 16 (Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Ball *et al.*, 2000) and likelihood of progression to Higher Education (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Pugsley, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005). One’s structural position in terms of social class, and also other factors such as gender and perceived ability, can be seen to have a highly significant effect on the decisions that one makes regarding one’s education, training and career options.

This section will provide an engagement with this discussion, arguing that theses of individualised decision-making make an important contribution to our understanding of choices and choice processes, showing how individuals make decisions through processes of strategic reasoning and prioritisation. However, the continued ubiquity of social class differentials in relation to educational decisions and thus life-chances, as well as the influence of other structural factors such as gender and ability⁶, mean that structural factors should not be obscured. Rather, they should be considered to have a continued defining effect on the decisions that are made. Consequently, a theoretical framework is needed which takes account of both strategic decision-making and structural constraints which shape the decisions which one perceives as available and possible.

Government policy in recent years has increasingly developed on free market principles, based on neo-liberal rhetoric (Lauder, 1997). The prevalence of a marketised and enterprise-based culture in the 1980s was characterised by home ownership, upward mobility and vast increases in the professional and managerial workforce (Savage *et al.*, 1992). Educational policy under the Conservatives, particularly in the period following the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), and, latterly, under the post-1997 New Labour government has been characterised by a shift towards a consumerist agenda (Coffey, 2001; Pugsley, 2004; Tomlinson, 2005). The introduction

⁶ Ability can be considered to be structural in that it is thought to be shown through the gaining of particular qualifications, which in turn have a structuring effect on one's available choices in life – for instance, certain levels of qualification are needed in order to apply for particular jobs or university courses. Links between ability and the achievement of particular qualifications and destinations can be further seen to be structured by one's social class background (Reid *et al.*, 1991; Tinklin, 2003; Sutton Trust, 2005), with those from middle class backgrounds and who attend independent schools tending to achieve higher grades and to be more likely to gain places at top universities.

of market forces into education as a result of the policies of Open Enrolment (where parents have a right to express a preference for a school for their child) and Local Management of Schools (where funds are allocated to schools dependent on pupil numbers), enshrined in the 1988 ERA, led to an education system characterised by increased competitiveness and individualism (Tomlinson, 2005). This introduced a so-called quasi-market (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993) in the maintained sector of education, since although marketised principles were adopted, consumers (that is, pupils and their parents) do not pay directly for their education in the state maintained sector. The independent sector of education represents a more established, ‘pure’ market (Gorard, 1997). Since parents pay directly for their children’s education in the independent sector, those schools that attract higher student numbers accrue greater financial rewards (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Further, the possibility of exit from the system (moving one’s child to another school) means that independent schools must listen to parents’ needs and desires in order to generate loyalty to their ‘brand’ and to remain in business (Hirschmann, 1970; Connell *et al.*, 1982; Chubb and Moe, 1997). The introduction of market forces into the maintained sector clearly aimed for a similar effect, with funds following pupils meaning that popular schools would be able to expand, with unpopular schools forced out of the market, thus providing an incentive for high standards. More recent policies have continued to widen choice and an ethos of marketisation within the maintained sector. The policy of allowing schools to develop a specialism, introduced under the Conservative administration in 1993, has continued under New Labour, with maintained schools bidding for specialist status in

subjects such as Business, Languages, Sport and the Arts. Under the 1998 Education Act, these schools were granted the right to admit up to 10% of their students based on ‘aptitude’ for their specialist subject area. These schools were said in 1998 by the then education secretary, David Blunkett, to offer diversity, and to cater to students’ individual strengths (Tomlinson, 2005). Recent moves towards the expansion of Higher Education, to include the target set by New Labour of 50% of young people entering HE by 2010, and programmes designed to widen participation and access, have led to this sector too becoming increasingly marketised (Pugsley, 2004).

Such marketised principles are characteristic of a neo-liberal agenda, based around notions of meritocracy, with individual success or failure as the consequence not of structural factors such as social class and gender, but of the decisions that one makes (Nairn and Higgins, 2007; Davies and Bansel, 2007). Social class is thus posited as having a declining effect. Indeed, the use of social class in analysis has been dismissed by some as an outdated relic of modernism (Pahl, 1989; Beck, 1992), a ‘zombie category’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 203). These authors instead emphasise individualised choice processes, which afford the ability to construct one’s own destiny, free from constraint.⁷

Integral to the neo-liberal agenda are themes of individual choice. Davies and Bansel have noted how through neo-liberalism, people become re-configured as ‘productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives’ (2007: 248) with their own life situations seen as the direct result of the

⁷ Lovell (2004) has noted that this perspective has also been adopted by some feminists, on the grounds of the assertion of the demise of social class and patriarchy, the extension of the status of the ‘individual’ to include women, and the degree of increased agency afforded by carrying out analysis based on individuals rather than family groups.

decisions which they, as individuals, have made. These notions of choice are underpinned by concepts of economic rationalism (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Nairn and Higgins, 2007), whereby human choice making is perceived to be based on principles of utility maximisation (Becker, 1977, 1991, 1996; Coleman and Fararo, 1992). That is, when an individual makes a decision, this is perceived to be based on the consideration of all available options, and weighing these up in terms of which will give the most benefit, which is the option that will be chosen. This has come to be known as Rational Choice Theory (RCT). This maximising behaviour is perceived to be consistent, exhibiting very little change across time and space.

Whilst this theoretical position has its roots in economics, it is not restricted to this field, and has been applied to other situations such as the family (Becker, 1991). For instance, with regard to parental expenditure on their offspring's education, Becker postulates that parents make decisions based on their expected 'rate of return', and bearing in mind that the more money that they will spend on their children's education, the less they will have available to spend on themselves. Such ideas have been followed up by Jordan *et al.*, (1994) who have applied RCT to decisions that middle class families might make about their lives, including decisions about their children's education. Demonstrating how these decisions were made, what Jordan *et al* showed in their study was how these parents weighed up decisions regarding whether to educate their children in the independent or maintained sector against expected returns (for example, high marks, entry to university). Further to this, several of these families had developed

contingency plans for use in the case of anything going wrong (such as illness or unemployment), and these also followed rational lines. For instance, one family had decided that their main priority was their children's education, and had decided to opt to send them to an independent school. However, the father's job was unstable, and without this income, payment of school fees would be difficult. This family had therefore decided that if that father did lose his job, they would sell their home and move into rented accommodation, in order to continue to finance their children's education. Jordan *et al.* concluded that these families, in their decision-making, were making rational choices, with the overriding consideration of 'putting the family first'.

However, it must be borne in mind that the subjects of Jordan *et al.*'s study were largely white, British, middle class parents living in nuclear family groups in the South of England. The rational choosing subject position may not be equally available to those from other backgrounds who may find their structural position leads to greater restriction in their decision-making (Davies, 1991). Indeed, when considering neo-liberal policies of marketisation within education, it is important to note that these have been more readily utilised by middle class families, who are more able to obtain, read and decipher the relevant information relating to school choice, thus enhancing their children's chances of getting accepted at a top school (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1997). Tomlinson (2005) has noted that, whilst diversity and choice were promised, this was problematic in that it in fact led to a 'pecking order' of schools that continued to mirror the social class structure. Furthermore, with respect to university choice, Reay

et al., (2005) have found that the position of rational chooser is one which is more available to those from middle class backgrounds, and particularly those who attend independent schools, as their structural position offers them more freedom in their choices. Their study focussed on university choice, and involved interviews with young people from middle class and working class backgrounds who had decided to go to university, mature students, and a group of people who had decided not to go to university. The decisions of the majority were instead characterised by 'themes of serendipity, intuitive response, narrow focus, directionlessness and making decisions on the hop' (Reay *et al.*, 2005:59). They found that few of their respondents operated with what they referred to as 'objective calculative rationalism' (Reay *et al.*, 2005:59) when making decisions, and these tended to be the young people who attended independent schools, who chose certain options and eliminated others based on explicit and tacit recommendations from their parents and school.

Indeed, those from middle class backgrounds have been considered to be affected significantly by structural factors in their decision-making, and this leads to their continued advantage. For instance, studies by Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001) and Power *et al.*, (2003) have revealed the expectation which is placed on some middle class young people by their families and schools that they will go to university, and in some cases it is anticipated that this will be a specific high ranking and high status university, with Oxbridge entry as a clear and notable expectation in many cases. This was seen to be a source of stress to these young people, with some of the young women from Walkerdine *et al.*'s study developing

psychological problems on account of the strain put on them by this expectation. They are expected to go to university on account of their class background, it is ‘what people like us do’ (Hutchings, 2003) and this clearly represents a form of structural constraint. In other cases, for middle class young people, their structural position can operate as a source of enablement. For the middle class young people in the studies by both Pugsley (2004) and Reay *et al.*, (2005) their secure family financial situation meant that they could afford to move away from their local area to go to university. By contrast, for some of their working class counterparts, university could only be afforded if they continued to inhabit the family home.

Whilst the idea of choice-making as an entirely individualised and unconstrained process may be appealing for those whose social class backgrounds provide the resources for them to believe that they are creating their own destinies, in these cases it is rather that these structural factors have an invisible quality (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). Their effect on the decisions that young people make remains. However, by neglecting to mention structural factors, such as gender and social class, the highly significant effects of these structural factors are negated. This could be damaging for those in less privileged social locations, for whom, without structure, there is the implication that they are themselves to blame for their own lowly position. Brannen and Nilsen (2005) assert that to ignore structure is to dismiss the possibility of inequalities resulting from systemic and systematic differences in resources available to different groups, and

that these remain crucial in the shaping of young people's outlooks and future life courses.

Certainly, social class and other structural factors are highly significant, and this has meant that the negation of the effect of social class within theories of individualised and agentic choice has come in for extensive criticism. For example, Archer and Tritter (2000) have argued that structural and cultural properties have continued significance in people's lives, and therefore should not be reduced away. In a similar connection, Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) critiqued Pahl's (1989) assertion that class is declining in significance, stating that they see class analysis to have a promising future, and emphasising the continual presence of social class as highly significant in the structuring of society. Lucey (2001) has also argued for the continued significance of social class, citing the ubiquitous similarities in young middle class women's progression to university in order to refute the declining importance of social class in transitions as argued by theses of individualism. Similarly, Skeggs (1997) has argued that if social class is no longer used as a tool in analysis, this does not mean that class inequality no longer exists in structuring people's lives. Rather, it has a silencing effect on those who are marginalised by society, leading to a situation where it becomes more difficult for sources of inequality and exploitation to be identified and challenged. Further contradictions have been highlighted between government ideas of rationality within a neo-liberal model in relation to education, and how students actually go about making their decisions relating to university and course (Baldwin and James, 2000).

Further to this, Savage (1995) has also argued convincingly against theories that posit the decline of class. Critiquing the focus of much class-based analysis on the working class, he suggests that increasing class fragmentation and the decline of the ‘traditional’ working class based around the labour movement and Labour politics has led to the contention that analyses based on social class are irrelevant. He postulates that work on social class should not be simply about the bifurcation of the working class and middle class. Rather, it should represent an attempt to explore how social structures interrelate with forms of agentic decision-making, and how various forms of cultural identity are interlinked with mechanisms that produce inequality: points to which I will return later in this chapter. He makes similar assertions in a later article (Savage, 2003). Discussing recent studies by Ball (2003); Archer *et al.* (2003) and Power *et al.*, (2003), Savage states that social class remains a legitimate and necessary area of study, because of the persistence of differential educational attainment between classes. Savage believes that those who seek to deny the perpetual significance of class differences are in fact generalising the experiences of the middle class as though they applied to all.

The acknowledgement of the continued effects of structure on decision-making has led to the development of more sociological accounts of choice, whereby choice is still considered as the outcome of a process of strategic reasoning, but structure also plays a part in this process. However, the structural factors considered in these studies tend to be those which focus on social class, with other structural aspects such as gender being neglected in these accounts.

For instance, Goldthorpe (1996; 1998) has proposed the idea of Rational Action Theory (RAT), whereby the decision about the rational course of action to take is moved into the hands of the individual actor. Writing in relation to educational decision-making and ensuing career outcomes of people from different class backgrounds, he notes the persistence of differential outcomes over time for people from different social class backgrounds. He posits individual actors as ‘acting autonomously and [...] seeking their goals in ways that are more or less appropriate to the situations in which they find themselves’ (Goldthorpe, 1996:485). In seeking to achieve the goals that one wants to reach, one will, according to Goldthorpe, weigh up the costs and benefits to oneself of following this course of action, using the resources available and adapting to situations in which one finds oneself. Thus, he asserts that for middle class young people, the cost of going to university is able to be absorbed by their families, both directly, in terms of fees and monetary support, and indirectly in terms of the disadvantage of that young person not being in employment. University is therefore rendered a natural progression for these young people, with the concomitant benefit that their social class position is maintained. For those from working class backgrounds, the cost of going to university may be perceived to be higher, and this would particularly be the case if the young person were to fail the course or to drop out. By contrast, the benefits of less ambitious educational options such as vocational courses were perceived to be more tangible, consequently the latter courses were more likely to be selected.

Thus, Goldthorpe's work can be seen to draw on structural aspects in order to inform a discourse of decision-making in which the individual is able to make strategic and agentic choices, but within the confines of his or her social class background, which renders some choices more likely than others on account of their relative cost and benefit to the particular individual.

From a similar perspective, and drawing on Goldthorpe's earlier work which raises the necessity of the consideration of structural factors in the decision-making process (for example, Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992), Gambetta (1987) assessed the impact of structure and agency in the decision-making processes of school leavers in Italy. His study aimed to uncover whether these young people 'jumped' (that is, made agentic decisions) or were 'pushed' (made decisions influenced by structure). Similarly to Goldthorpe (1996; 1998), Gambetta asserted that those young people from working class backgrounds were more sensitive regarding their likelihood of success when choosing future courses of study, and were therefore more cautious. By contrast, those young people from middle class families were more likely to be able to counter failure, for instance, by their family funding a place on a vocational course in the case of an unsuccessful application to university. Thus, for those from middle class backgrounds, the cost of failure may be more easily absorbed. Gambetta concluded that young people evaluate what it is possible for them to do within the framework of their structural location, when making decisions about education and careers, and, having established what is available and possible, make a rational evaluation of these leading to the final choice.

Further to this, Hatcher (1998) has provided an analysis of studies of educational decision-making, in an attempt to integrate structure and agency. He takes examples from previous studies that have drawn on structural factors in their explanation of decision-making processes, such as Gewirtz *et al.*'s (1995) study of parental choice of schools, which identified differences in parental choice of education according to social class background. Gewirtz *et al.*, identified that middle class parents tended to engage with the education market in a more strategic fashion, playing an active role in the decision-making process. By contrast, those from working class families made decisions that were far more closely tied to a sense of locality and community. These decisions are attributed by Gewirtz *et al.* to differences between social classes, but Hatcher has furthered this, showing how the decisions being made are not only constrained by the structural position of the chooser, but that their decisions are strategic and rational within this structural framework. For instance, not only does he view the strategic middle class parents as making choices that he perceives to be rational, but he also believes that the working class parents are more strategic than Gewirtz *et al.* recognise. In choosing schools located in close proximity to their homes, these working class parents demonstrate the priority which they afford to local networks of support, which may be more indispensable to them than for those from middle class backgrounds. Therefore it can be seen from this example that structural factors can be seen to be persistent in their influence of educational decision-making, although this is not to negate the role of individual strategic and agentic decision-making.

Correspondingly, several other studies within the field of educational decision-making have utilised a theoretical framework that either explicitly or tacitly draws on aspects of rationality. Middle class parents choosing independent schools for their children have been shown to make decisions in a rational way by Gorard (1996; 1997), who describes the decision-making process as beginning with a wide ‘choice set’ of schools, and narrowing this down according to their own preferences. Other authors have emphasised different priorities within a school choice framework which seems largely rational, such as parents choosing independent schools for their offspring due to a desire for higher academic standards (Smedley, 1995), to gain ‘the edge’ over students educated in the maintained sector (Roker, 1993) or to ‘escape’ the perceived failings of the maintained sector (Johnson, 1987). With respect to Higher Education choice-making, rational frameworks have been used to analyse the decisions made by young people from different social class backgrounds when choosing Higher Education courses and institutions (Rochat and Demeulemeester, 2001; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) notion of pragmatic rationality provides a further adaptation of rational choice theory, where decision-making by young people about their future careers is seen as more pragmatic than systematic, based on known information that is necessarily partial. Moreover, Nairn and Higgins (2007) have drawn attention to the presence of neo-liberal discourses in young people’s accounts of their own decision-making processes, drawing on concepts such as that of the knowledge economy (based around getting a good job through hard work and the gaining of qualifications).

However, concepts of rationality and rational choice have been considered problematic by some authors. Archer (2000) has criticised theories based on rational and individualised choice as they do not consider emotive ties such as the family and friendship, which in fact may override the decision that is perceived as the most rational. Further to this, Hughes (2002a) has highlighted problems in rational theories resulting from their explicit individualism, which takes little account of social structures of advantage and disadvantage, power relations or family connections, assuming that decision-makers only take account of their own individual needs. She notes that the concept of rationality is associated with objectivity, with no room for subjective feelings and emotions: decision-making is rather seen as based on a detached analysis of the facts. Thus, the concept of rationality is rendered problematic on account of its connotations that it is possible for a systematic, emotionless and atomistic individual to make decisions without regard for others.

The concept of choice itself has also been considered problematic, because of its implication that individuals are entirely free to choose in an agentic manner. Ball *et al.* (2002) reject the concept of ‘choice’ in favour of one of ‘decision-making’, which they consider to draw allusions to concepts of power, but to imply the constraint of structural factors rather than a sense of complete freedom. Moreover, Hughes (2002a) draws attention to feminist critiques of Rational Choice Theory, which highlight the continued salience of structural factors. However, she considers that structural explanations in themselves are also problematic on account of their determinism. A more favourable account of the decision-making process

may be considered to be offered by post-structuralist accounts of decision-making (Davies, 1990, 1991; Davies *et al.*, 2001; Watson, 1997), whereby individuals' desires and thus the decisions that they make are constructed through discourses to which they have access. One role which may be taken up in the decision-making process is that of agentic chooser, a role which Davies (1990, 1991) views as being particularly available to white, middle class men. One's subjectivity is constructed by and through the available discourses, and this ultimately limits the range of choices on offer. For example, Davies *et al.*, (2001) discuss their own personal constructions as 'good' schoolgirls as ensuing from discourses relating to their behaviour and attitudes, which they took up in their subjective construction of themselves in the role of 'good' students; and Chapman (2005) describes her construction as a middle class young woman as resulting from her middle-class family upbringing and experiences as a boarding school pupil. From a similar, discourse-based perspective, Watson (1997) has critiqued neo-liberal assertions that assume that with respect to school choice, all parents have the freedom and possibility to determine their own preferences. Rather, she notes that their preferences are determined by prevalent discourses surrounding areas such as gender norms, traditionalism, ability and achievement, all of which were influential in the decisions made by parents in her study to make applications for their daughters to study at single sex schools. Moreover, Proweller (1998), in her study of a girls' independent school in the United States, asserts that socially constructed identities of social class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are formed in and through discursive fields, leading to particular limits and possibilities being

perceived as open to young people as they mediate these discourses and develop their own identities.

Indeed, the concept of individualised and agentic decision-making is problematised by the influence of structural factors such as gender and social class, with one's structural location affecting how one makes sense of the world and how one's decisions are made (Watson, 1997; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). The use of a discourse-based perspective can be considered illuminatory, providing a detailed picture in relation to why a particular decision has been made (Alloway and Gilbert, 2004). Indeed, a discourse-based perspective offers the possibility of transcending the problematic binary between structure and agency, by adopting a perspective which encompasses both rather than insisting on the taking up of either structure or agency to the exclusion of the other (Hughes, 2002b). For this reason, I have chosen to adopt such a perspective in this study. Although discourse may be seen as merely an innocent stretch of words, it can also be understood as shaping who and what we are, and further, what we might become (Gee, 1997; Hughes, 2002b). Examining and deconstructing how people engage with and respond to discourses, and moreover, which discourses become positioned as dominant can be informative (Hughes, *ibid*). This is useful to the current project in offering the possibility of exploring the shaping of the subjectivities of the young women at Midham School, and the power that particular discourses held for them. The individualised agent remains significant in these accounts, but structural factors and the discourses surrounding them can also be seen as highly influential. The following sections will lay further emphasis on structural

influences, looking first at the influence of the educational establishment attended, followed by the impact of gender and social class on decision-making.

The ‘School Effect’?

In the previous section, I have advanced the necessity of considering structural factors, seeing these as leading to particular discourses that have a significant effect on one’s decision-making processes. Following on from this, I now explore these structural factors in more detail, looking specifically at how gender and social class shape processes of decision-making in the field of education. The school, and the family, will be focussed on here as the sites through which these structural factors are mediated, leading to profound effects on individuals’ subjective decision-making processes.

I have already noted that social class has been observed to have a significant effect on family decisions relating to school choice (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1997). The aforementioned studies show how middle class families tend to actively seek to send their offspring to high-performing schools in the maintained sector, or even to opt for the independent sector. At post-16 level, this distinction remains. Young people from middle class backgrounds are significantly more likely to stay on in education after the end of compulsory schooling (Connell *et al.*, 1982; Ball *et al.*, 2000), and furthermore, to access courses at this stage which enable them to progress onto Higher Education at the age of eighteen, which may, in turn, lead to high status professional careers (Goldthorpe, 1998).

Independent schools have been seen to be particularly effective in this regard, with high status occupations within medicine, law and the Church tending to be occupied by those educated in independent schools, and / or the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Reid *et al.*, 1991). Links have also been drawn between attending an independent school and progression to a high-ranking university, with half of all Oxbridge students attending independent schools (Sutton Trust, 2005).

Indeed, schools and the discourses occurring within them have been perceived to have a significant effect on those educated therein (Young, 1971; Connell *et al.*, 1982; Delamont, 1990), and this effect has been perceived to be particularly profound with respect to the independent sector (Roker, 1993; Power *et al.*, 2005; Pugsley, 2003, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005). Parents selecting independent schools for their offspring must perceive there to be a discernible advantage to be accrued by using them, by the fact that they pay fees to do so (Fox, 1985; Gorard, 1997) and this advantage is perceived as both academic and social (Ball, 2003). Concerning decisions relating to Higher Education, in their study of middle class young people, Power *et al.* (2003) noted the relatively smooth transition to university which many (but not all) of their respondents experienced. Particularly for those who attended independent schools, progression to a high status university was both expected and encouraged. Looking specifically at independent schools, Roker's (1993:136) study of young women educated in an independent school in the North of England found that the school enabled these young women to become the 'elite's elite', gaining 'the edge' over other young people, even those from

relatively advantaged backgrounds. This elitism was seen as both personal and structural. Personal elitism involved the development of high-status ambitions in an occupational sense, and the acquisition of personal skills such as increased confidence, which would lead to advantage in the labour market. Structural elitism stemmed from the structure of independent schools, such as high quality facilities, smaller classes, individual attention and detailed career preparation. The combination of these two led to these young women gaining an advantage against other young people of similar social class background and ability who had been educated in the maintained sector. Similarly, Proweller (1998) perceived that the parents of the students in her study, which was based on an elite girls' independent school in the United States, saw this school as providing their daughters with an extra advantage in the competitive educational and occupational marketplace. Further to this, Power *et al.* (2005) have demonstrated the continued effect of attending an independent school on young people's career trajectories and future earnings, with those who attended independent schools earning higher salaries at the age of thirty compared to their counterparts of similar academic ability who were educated in maintained schools.

A comparative study carried out by Pugsley (2003, 2004) in South Wales, sought to compare the choice processes of students educated in different schools and colleges, including independent schools, high-performing and lower-performing schools from the maintained sector and Further Education colleges. She found that schools differed in their level of engagement with the Higher Education market, and these variations had a

significant effect on the decisions and post-18 trajectories of the young people educated within them. The independent schools and the high-performing maintained schools in the study, all of which were attended overwhelmingly by students from middle class backgrounds, provided extensive detailed information and guidance to their students. This enabled the students attending these institutions to deal successfully with the university application process, leading to their successful applications to top universities. By contrast, particularly one of the colleges, and one of the maintained sector schools, which were attended predominantly by students from working class backgrounds, did not give their students so much guidance in the application process. Instead, they tended to rely on ‘Compact’ arrangements that they had with local post-1992 universities,⁸ who had agreed to accept the majority of their students, thus negating the necessity to engage more fully with the market of Higher Education. Pugsley saw this difference between educational establishments as offering an explanation as to why certain high status universities remain dominated by those from middle class backgrounds.

Similarly, Reay *et al.*’s study (2001; 2005) of Higher Education decision-making focussed on differences between those educated in different sector types of institution. Based in London, it drew comparisons between young people educated in independent schools, maintained schools with largely middle class and with largely working class intakes, and Further Education colleges, as well as mature students. Again, they found significant differences between students from different educational

⁸ The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 granted university status to former polytechnics.

institutions, with the independent schools in their study fostering close links with prestigious and high-ranking universities, particularly Oxbridge. By contrast, the institutions attended predominantly by those from working class backgrounds had closer links with ‘new’ universities. The schools from the maintained sector which were attended by middle class students were considered by the authors to be oriented to institutions mid-way between Oxbridge and ‘new’ universities, perhaps more closely aligned with the ‘redbrick’⁹ universities. These differences between different types of school or college were found to exist even amongst students of similar backgrounds and abilities, across the independent / maintained school divide (Reay *et al.*, 2001). The authors use these differences in developing the term ‘school effect’, based on the Bourdieusian concept of ‘institutional habitus’ to explain the differences that different institutions make to the decisions made by those educated within them.

It is useful at this point to provide a brief consideration of Bourdieu’s concepts, as they have been informative to several studies in the field of educational decision-making, particularly those which consider social class as an integral theme (Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; David *et al.*, 2003; Pugsley, 2004; Brooks, 2005). Bourdieu’s view of choice is summed up by stating that when making choices, one has to opt for what is possible to do, not just for oneself personally but in consideration of the social class to which one belongs and the opportunities it offers. Choices are seen as the practical operation of habitus – a system of dispositions acquired from aspects of one’s structural background which is ‘objectively adjusted to the

⁹ A group of older, civic universities which achieved university status prior to World War 2, including the Universities of Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield.

particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu, 1977: 95). It is acquired subconsciously, being inculcated into the individual by his or her environment and interactions with others over time, throughout life. coming out of one's habitual state of being and being adjusted to the conditions in which one finds oneself. This is imbued firstly through primary pedagogic action, which occurs at the earliest phase of upbringing (at the family level) and produces dispositions characteristic of one's group or class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This has been defined elsewhere by Bourdieu as 'familial habitus'. Secondary pedagogic action takes place at a later stage, throughout one's life, for instance through the educational establishment which one attends, and the degree to which it has an impact on one's dispositions is related to the distance between the ideas which the secondary pedagogic action is attempting to impose, and the habitus which has already been imposed at an earlier stage. Socialisation of the individual leads to the imprinting of knowledge of one's structural position and cultural background, leading also to particular dispositions which are thus acquired by experience rather than by implicit teaching (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Thus, knowledge about one's class and expectations of available options is inculcated, and this leads to social reproduction of class from generation to generation. Indeed, habitus is the basis of strategies of reproduction, subconsciously colluding in the maintenance of the social order, and relations between different classes or groups within this (Bourdieu, 1996). The inculcation of habitus into the individual leads to one misrecognising the cultural arbitrary (the culture of the dominant

classes, which, while it is not ‘better’ than that of other classes in and of itself, is misrecognised as such through their dominant position and ability to impose their taste) as legitimate, and thus the culture of the working class as illegitimate (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Pedagogic work carried out by the family and the school leads to the inculcation of the dominant cultural arbitrary and its transmission from generation to generation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In terms of the family, particular areas of knowledge, cultural preferences, the importance of certain family connections etc. are inculcated into the habitus from birth onwards through primary pedagogic work (*ibid*). Advantage is further reproduced through secondary pedagogic work, taking place through the education system - indeed, for Bourdieu, the education system is central to this reproduction of advantage in society, with schools and universities as key actors in the maintenance of advantage by those from upper and middle-class backgrounds (*ibid*; Bourdieu, 1996). This leads to certain cultural forms, for instance, types of art and music as enjoyed by the upper and middle class, being considered to be the most important, and acquisition of these particular tastes being seen as most legitimate (Bourdieu, 1971; 1984). Such arbitrary imposition of the tastes of the dominant classes is seen by Bourdieu as an act of symbolic violence. It is symbolic because no real force is used, but still the idea is inculcated that this should be the dominant cultural arbitrary. The pedagogic action which takes place in the school corresponds to the interest of dominant groups, in its mode of imposition and in terms of what is imposed onto whom (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

The type of capital or cultural arbitrary which is dominant is linked to the field within which one is working, with field and habitus being two concepts which are intrinsically linked. Bourdieu's concept of field refers to the structured system of social relations in which individuals, groups and organisations lie in relation to each other. He views social activity within fields as resembling a market, considering that the middle and upper classes have more of what he terms 'capitals' (summed up in Bourdieu, 1997), that is, economic capital (financial wealth), social capital (significant relationships with others) and cultural capital (the knowledge which is considered most legitimate in a particular social setting, i.e. the cultural arbitrary discussed in Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Different positions within the field are located in different relationships to the forms of capital, and moreover, the existence of a particular field presupposes (and indeed, creates on the part of participants) a belief in the legitimacy and value of the capital that is most significant in that particular field. Furthermore, capital tends to attract more capital (Bourdieu, 1996), for instance, if one has good educational qualifications (cultural capital) one can gain a job with a higher salary (economic capital). These forms of capital are not held by members of all groups equally, but tend to be concentrated more in the middle classes. In their analysis of Bourdieu's work relating to education, Grenfell and James (1998:21) sum up his definition of capitals thus:

in the case of education, we do not enter fields with equal amounts [...] of capital. Some have inherited wealth, cultural distinctions from up-bringing and family

connections. Some individuals, therefore, already possess qualities of relevant capital bestowed upon them in the process of habitus formation, which makes them better players than others in certain field games. Conversely, some are disadvantaged.

Whilst Bourdieu's concepts are useful heuristic devices, and can be used to explain concepts of social class reproduction and privilege within education, aspects of these remain problematic. Indeed, some analysts of Bourdieu have posited that his work is overly deterministic, and fails to allow for individual resistance and agency (Jenkins, 1992; Nash, 1990; Giroux, 1983; Hodkinson, 1998). Brooks (2005) highlights similar issues in her study of Higher Education decision-making for young people in a Sixth Form college, finding the concept of the habitus to be inflexible, not allowing for changes in disposition or class mobility, and reproductive rather than transformative. Brooks draws attention to studies by Reay (1998) and Hodkinson (1998) which use a Bourdieusian framework but which take this forward by looking at the potential to transform the habitus. Brooks considers that these present a useful extension of Bourdieu's theory, as she perceives Bourdieu's theoretical position to be under theorised in this respect.

Similarly, Giroux (1983) has criticised theories of reproduction such as Bourdieu's, on account of what he perceives to be a tendency to stress the notion of history being made behind the backs of members of society, thus negating individual contributions: 'human subjects generally 'disappear'

amidst a theory that leaves no room for self-creation, mediation and resistance' (Giroux, 1983:259). Connell *et al.* likewise see reproduction accounts as problematic, noting that the student is not seen as an agentic decision-making individual in these accounts, but rather as 'a bundle of abilities, knowledge and attitudes furnished by the parents' (1982:188). Indeed, individual agency and the construction of the subjective decision-making agent are key in exploring educational decisions, and this appears rather under theorised in the work of Bourdieu. Consequently, whilst his work is used in this study, it is with the above critiques in mind.

Thus it can be seen that the educational institution attended plays an important role in shaping the decisions that one makes, and this is further informed by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capitals, as detailed above. In the following section, I continue on a similar theme, turning to look at the construction of the agentic decision-maker in relation to gender, particularly focussing on the single sex school.

Gender, and Single Sex Education

Gender, and specifically, the decision whether to use a single sex or co-educational school, is another aspect that makes a significant difference, with respect to the consequent effect of the school attended on the individual's future educational decision-making. Single sex schools are in the minority in England and Wales today, although this was not always the case. In the tripartite system that existed after the 1944 Education Act, a number of schools, particularly the grammar schools, were single-sex.

However, with the move towards comprehensivisation in the 1960s and 1970s came increased progression towards co-education, leading to several schools that were previously single-sex becoming co-educational at the time. In areas that retain a grammar school system, single-sex schools often remain available and this is particularly relevant to my research, as grammar schools continued to exist in the county within which Midham School was located.

Single sex education continues to thrive in the independent sector, although recently many schools have made moves to become co-educational, for financial and/or social reasons. This is predominantly a case of former boys' schools becoming co-educational, with some making this change at sixth form level (Price, 1993; Cresser, 1993) and others making moves towards co-education throughout all year groups (Dooley and Fuller, 2003). Only a small number of girls' schools have become co-educational. However, there remain a relatively large number of single-sex schools in the independent sector, with 182 out of 1204 independent schools in England educating girls only (260 schools including those which are predominantly for girls but have a small number of male pupils, usually in younger classes) (ISC, 2007).

Thus it is evident that debates about single sex schooling are likely to be more pertinent in the middle class 'circuit of schooling' (Ball *et al.*, 1997), which includes (or in some cases, may consist entirely of) schools in the independent sector. Indeed, parents who opt for the independent sector of education have been shown to discern a distinct difference between single sex and co-educational schools, and this has a significant impact on the

decisions that they make (Lee and Marks, 1992; Watson, 1997; Jackson and Bisset, 2005). Jackson and Bisset (2005) carried out research relating to parental decisions to utilise three independent schools in England, comprising single sex boys' and girls' schools and a co-educational school. They found that the key features guiding parents' decisions were the schools' reputation and examination results. However, of particular salience in the decision-making process for many of these parents was whether the school was single-sex or co-educational. Many of the parents held a view that single sex schools held advantages for girls, particularly in an academic sense, whereas co-educational schools were perceived to hold social advantages for boys.

Similarly, in a study of parental views regarding mixed and single-sex education in relation to secondary schools in the maintained sector (West and Hunter, 1993) it was found that parents considered single-sex schools to allow girls to gain personal and academic self-confidence, and to reduce sex-stereotyped subject choices. By contrast, for boys, parents perceived there to be social advantages in being educated with girls. Moreover, in research based in Australia, Watson (1997) found that parents valued single sex education for academic reasons, although this was tied in with a desire to remove their daughters from what they perceived to be the distraction and potentially disruptive influence of boys.

Furthermore, whilst Jackson and Bisset (2005) found that middle class parents of sons valued traditionalism when deciding on a school, parents of daughters did not tend to find these aspects appealing. The authors attribute this to the differing histories of boys' and girls' schools,

and the difference in status ascribed to them. This is similar to results found in the USA, in a study by Lee and Marks (1992), who looked at parents' reasons for selecting single sex independent schools. Parents and their offspring tended to find these schools desirable *because* of their single sex nature rather than because otherwise desirable schools happened to be single sex. Whilst boys and their parents who use single sex schools expect to find opportunity through traditional structures, on account of the traditionally dominant role for males in society, girls and their parents seek opportunities through schools with non-traditional structures. Thus whilst for boys, a school with a traditional structure provides increased opportunity; for girls, a traditional structure is based on preparation for unequal status, and therefore for those families seeking increased opportunities for their daughters, schools which are more progressive and modern are sought.

Indeed, the potential for opportunity through the use of single sex schools is highly valued by some parents who opt for these schools for their offspring, and is a source of promotion for the schools themselves. For instance, in a paper based on the marketing of two single sex (girls') schools in the South of England, Ball and Gewirtz (1997) highlight the presence of discourses that draw on a progressive and liberal feminist ethos. In their open days and marketing materials, the single sex schools in this study emphasised the availability of equal opportunities. The schools were keen to show that girls could succeed in all areas, including traditionally male dominated areas such as Science and Information Technology. Parents selecting these schools had taken up these discourses, perceiving there to be a lack of gender stereotyping in these schools. However, such discourses

were also enmeshed with other discourses relating to ideas of traditionalism and respectability (see also Delamont, 1990; Watson, 1997), with key semiotic themes running through the publicity materials relating to refuge, safety and calmness. The ethos of these schools was considered by the authors to be ‘strongly based on the absence of and ‘escape’ from boys and the forms of behaviour and relationships that girls are able to create when boys are absent’ (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997:210). Further to this, notions of traditional femininity are considered by the authors to be played out in the marketing of these schools with respect to the emphasis that is placed on extra-curricular activities, particularly feminised activities such as drama and dance. In conclusion, Ball and Gewirtz see single sex girls’ schooling in the UK as contradictory, delivering both sources of opportunity and sources of traditionalism and oppression to the young women educated within them.

Thus single sex education can be seen to exist in a location between dual discourses of traditionalism / oppression and progressivism / liberal femininity. Further illumination of this point lies in the historical origins of these schools. Academic independent schools for girls were first introduced in the UK during the late 19th century. Intending to provide an academic education for girls, with a grounding in subjects which had been previously dominated by males, such as Algebra, Latin and Grammar, leading to university entry, these schools took as their models Frances Mary Buss’s North London Collegiate School and Cheltenham Ladies’ College (under the guidance of Dorothea Beale), which in turn, were based on the academic boys’ public schools (Kamm, 1965, 1971; Walford, 1993; Delamont, 1989).

Although other fee-paying schools for girls were available at this time, these tended to be small boarding schools, where girls' learning centred around 'the accomplishments' such as needlework, dancing, music and French. Such 'accomplishments' were deemed to be essential to their future lives as leisured women, married to men of similar social standing, with no intention of progression towards university or employment (Delamont, 1989). As sending daughters to school became more popular amongst middle class families, they began to send girls who were less academically-minded, and this led some schools to adopt a curriculum which tended towards the latter 'accomplishments' and more traditionally female subjects, whereas other schools remained resolutely academically-based (Coffey and Delamont, 2001).

Similarly, in the context of single sex independent education in the USA, Lee and Marks (1992) and Lee *et al.* (1994) have highlighted the distinction between different types of independent school, which are based on similar origins to those in the UK. They drew a contrast between those schools that were modelled on prestigious boys' schools, which functioned primarily as preparatory institutions for elite colleges, and those schools that were of a more 'finishing school' type, which whilst not ignoring the academic side, placed greater emphasis on feminine pursuits. Whilst the former type of school tended to pay serious attention to issues of gender equity and could therefore be seen as providing opportunity structures for young women, the latter type of school was focussed more strongly on issues of social support (Lee *et al.*, 1994). However, this led to some instances where schools of the latter type could be seen to reinforce

behaviour that was dependent or childlike. Furthermore, the ‘finishing school’ type institutions tended to be less rigorous in an academic sense. Whilst some single sex schools provided opportunities for young women to engage at a high level in academic discourses, empowering them to take advantage of opportunities to participate fully in academic life and later, in the labour market, others with a more traditional (and thus unequal) structure more problematically fostered dependency amongst their pupils. The adoption of an ‘ethic of care’ (Strachan, 1999) position whereby female educational leaders adopt caring roles with the intention of providing empowerment for students can, in fact, lead to a reinforcement of a traditional bifurcation between ‘male’ and ‘female’ gendered roles.

Thus, it can be seen that the diversity that is uncovered here in relation to single sex education, both relating to those schools in the independent sector specifically, and single sex schools more generally, points towards widely variant outcomes for their students, dependent on the ethos of the individual school. Indeed, whilst girls’ levels of academic achievement have caught up with and surpassed boys in all subjects in public examinations in recent years (Weiner *et al.*, 1997; Arnot *et al.*, 1999; Tinklin, 2003) their subject and career decision-making remains, on the whole, gender-stereotyped. Brown (2001) looked at the impact of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, which opened up all school subjects to both genders, and the 1988 introduction of the National Curriculum, which established a common core of subjects to be studied by all students. She found that, although the examination entries at GCSE level by gender became less unequal on account of these changes, there remained relatively

high inequality in entry for different subjects between the genders at A level. Studies in co-educational institutions in the maintained sector have revealed similar disparities between the genders. Colley *et al.*, (1994) found that the preferred subjects of young people aged 11-13 in co-educational middle schools tended to be gender-stereotyped, with girls preferring English and Humanities-based subjects, and boys preferring Science and PE. Likewise, Stables and Stables (1995) found in their study of students in a maintained sector Sixth Form college that, whilst both sexes cited English as the subject that they preferred, girls otherwise tended to prefer subjects with a language bias, whereas boys preferred quantitative subjects. Where girls had chosen more male-dominated, quantitative subjects such as Physics and Chemistry, these were overwhelmingly the most able students, who tended to respond to these subjects very positively. Girls in particular tended to shy away from subjects they perceived as ‘hard’ such as Mathematics, revealing their lower academic self-concepts, something which has also been found by Sullivan (2003). Moreover, in the USA, Montgomery (2004) found that college students’ choices of major were highly gendered, although they tended to justify this in terms of their own individual preference rather than ‘what men / women are supposed to do’.

Conversely, in a recent study carried out by Francis (2000) and concerning pupils aged 14-16 educated in a co-educational maintained school, some evidence was uncovered for a blurring of traditional boundaries between subjects, with young people of both sexes expressing preferences for English and Mathematics, and more girls than boys stating that Mathematics was their favourite subject. Students of both genders

perceived that both girls and boys had equal ability in all subjects, with those who disagreed with this saying that girls were more able in all areas. However, other than the aforementioned subjects of English and Mathematics, students' favourite subjects remained delimited by gender, with girls preferring Art and Drama, and boys preferring Science and Physical Education.

Furthermore, whilst discourses of liberal feminism in relation to single-sex schools have suggested that girls educated in these schools may have a less gender-stereotypical experience than those educated in a co-educational setting (Arnot *et al.*, 1999), evidence for this is inconclusive. Elwood and Gipps (1998), looking at single-sex schools in the maintained sector, found that pupils educated in these schools were only marginally more likely to take non-gender-stereotypical options at post-16 and degree level. Furthermore, a study by Francis *et al.* (2003) found that girls educated in both single-sex and co-educational schools tended to opt for feminised occupations, such as teaching or care work. From this, Francis *et al.* draw the conclusion that the school cannot eliminate the impact of gender discourses found in wider society.

However, it must be considered which young women are making gender-stereotypical and gender-atypical decisions. With middle class girls tending to perform better than both working-class girls and boys from all backgrounds (Tinklin, 2003), and the aforementioned evidence of high-performing young women tending to choose gender-atypical subjects and respond to them more positively (Stables and Stables, 1995), it may be the case that middle class young women are more likely to opt for such

subjects. Research evidence from the independent sector reinforces this assertion: a study carried out on behalf of the Girls' Schools Association (GSA)¹⁰ has revealed that in comparison to all girls nationally, girls educated in GSA schools were more likely to study for A level qualifications in Mathematics, Science and Modern Languages (GSA, 2004). For instance, 25.5% of girls studying in GSA schools entered A level Chemistry in 2004, representing 8.1% of the total number of A level entries from GSA schools, whereas overall on a national level, only 4.6% of examination entries by girls were for A level Chemistry. Further to this, an earlier study carried out by Roker (1993) in a single sex (girls) independent school indicated strong preferences amongst the girls educated within the school for subjects such as science and engineering.

Thus it would appear that middle class young women who attend independent schools may have a greater propensity to go against options with a traditional gendered bias when making decisions about their subjects of study at post-16 and post-18 level. However, this is called into question by the differences between those schools favouring a liberal feminist discourse and those favouring discourses of traditional femininity, as mentioned above. In turn, this raises the issue of the diversity of schools in the independent sector, and the heterogeneity of those who use these schools and their wants and reasons for doing so. Indeed, it is to a further analysis of the heterogeneity of the middle class (and particularly of independent school users) that I now turn.

¹⁰ The GSA is the main association to which Heads of girls' independent schools in the UK belong.

The Middle Class Family

Not only is the school evidenced as significant in processes of decision-making, but the middle class family has also been seen as highly influential in the reproduction of structural positions and inequalities (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Reay, 1998; Ball, 2003; Ball and Vincent, 2005; Crompton, 2006). Such studies have drawn on Bourdieusian concepts of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986) in order to show how the middle class seek to reproduce their own social class position for their children. This is considered to occur from a young age, and continue throughout their education. For example, Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) showed how middle class mothers conveyed certain ideas and knowledge to their pre-school-aged daughters that were able to advantage them educationally, whereas the working class mothers in their study were unable to do this. Continuing on a similar theme, a study of middle class parents' selection of childcare and activities for their children (Ball and Vincent 2005; 2006; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Ball *et al.*, 2004) has shown how, from when their children are very young, middle class parents have sought to reproduce their own class position for their children through investment in extra-curricular activities that provide 'enrichment', such as music, dance, gymnastics and French. Moreover, Byrne (2006) found from her interviews with white, middle-class mothers, that their mothering practices, such as their construction of social networks, choice of schools for their children and planning of after-school activities, were significant in the

repetition and re-inscribing of particular discourses which were imbued with concepts of social class and of whiteness.

In a similar connection, in a study of mothers and their children who were at the stage of secondary school transfer at age eleven, Reay (1997; 1998a; 2000; 2005) observed that middle class mothers were able to endow educational advantage to their children more easily than working class mothers could, on account of having both more money to spend on their children and more time to spend with them. The former enabled them to be able to afford to hire help for their children, in the form of home tutors, and domestic help for themselves such as cleaners, thus enabling them to spend more time with their children, helping them to prepare for examinations and participate in extra-curricular activities. Reay links this to the Bourdieusian concept of capitals (see earlier), a link which is also employed by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995; see also Ball *et al.*, 1997) when looking at decision-making at the same stage of education. They argue that linguistic and cultural competences are endowed in the middle classes, and that these serve as a benefit in the educational marketplace. One needs knowledge about schools, the capacity to seek out, read and decipher information about the decision-making system and process, the ability to engage in positive self-presentation and the ability to ‘work the system’ in order that an informed decision can be made (Ball, 1993; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1997). These studies portray the aforementioned attributes as more likely to be held by middle class parents, and all of these are considered to be connected to parents making active choices about their children’s education.

Thus cosmopolitan, middle class parents are enabled to reinvest their cultural capital in exchange for a return of educational capital: they are using their competences (as well as their economic capital in many cases) in order to select what they believe is the best possible education for their children. For some parents, this means the decision to utilise an independent school for their offspring. In Ball's (2003) study of middle class families, he noted that those parents who use independent schools for their children secured their own sense of social structure through the filters of academic selectivity and cost in this sector. They wanted their children to go to school with others whose parents have similar backgrounds and aspirations, and thus 'bought' who went to the school as well as the education it would provide for their child: 'deploying their economic capital to buy educational advantages in the private system' (Ball, 2003:152). Similarly, Fox (1985) referred to the middle class parents in her study who sent their sons to a boarding school as buying intrinsic and instrumental educational advantages, utilising their privileged financial position in order to advantage their sons. She perceived that by the fact that these parents were willing to pay for their sons' education, they must be doing this with some idea about their desires for their sons' future, noting that these parents tended to aspire for their sons to go to good universities and move into occupations that are high in the social hierarchy. In a similar connection, Crompton (2006) has emphasised that economic and cultural capital have distinctive modes of transmission, but both of these forms of capital enable class to be reproduced through the family.

As middle class young people progress through their education, social class-based family influence on their decision-making remains, with the middle class family shown to be able to advantage their offspring in the post-school market of Higher Education and future careers (Reay *et al.*.. 2001, 2005; Walkerdine, 2001; Pugsley, 2004). Those from middle class backgrounds, and especially those who attend independent schools, have been shown to have a comfortable and relatively unproblematic trajectory through education, from compulsory schooling, to studying academic options in the Sixth Form, and then on to a high status university followed by a professional career (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2005). This is perceived to be aided and encouraged by their parents and families. For example, a study by Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001)¹¹ found that the majority of the middle class young women received both tacit and explicit discursive messages from their families throughout their lives that they were able and clever, and that university was a suitable destination for them. The authors found that such messages were less likely to be present in working class households, leading them to argue for the continued salience of social class in relation to educational experiences and pathways (Walkerdine *et al.*.. 2001). Whilst the middle class young women perceived university as ‘a rite of passage that most family members have undertaken’ (2001: 59), the authors saw the working class young women who went to university as experiencing shifts in identity due to their lack of experience in this sector.

For the young people in Pugsley’s (2004) study, differences in family educational experience ensuing from social class had led to different

¹¹ This study followed up on the working class and middle class young women and their families from their previous study (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989).

decision-making strategies being adopted by those from working class and middle class backgrounds. Those young people from working class backgrounds necessarily had to take a principal role in the decision-making process, on account of their parents' lack of skills and awareness of aspects of the Higher Education market. Similarly, in Brooks' (2005) study, middle class young people whose families had little or no experience of Higher Education had to take a key role in the decision-making process, although in some cases their families were keen to learn more about the process in order that they could offer help. By contrast, the majority of the middle class families in Pugsley's study (2004) were more aware of the Higher Education sector and could operate as skilled choosers, thus enabling them to advise their offspring and help them to make optimal decisions. The middle class families saw university as a 'preordained route beginning at primary school and continuing on through to university' (Pugsley, 2004: 88), an 'automatic' next step in the educational pathway' (*ibid*: 86), with these families tending to be proud and supportive of the choices that their children made. Whilst those from working class backgrounds were also usually proud and supportive, they tended to take a less prominent role, acknowledging their own lack of knowledge and experience in the Higher Education sector and relying on information that their offspring brought home from school or college.

Likewise, in their study of university decision-making, Reay, David and Ball (Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Ball *et al.*, 2002; David *et al.*, 2003) found that family educational background and experience had a significant effect on the decisions that young people made. For the middle class young

people in their study, particularly those who attended independent schools, the fact that they would progress on to university was an automatic assumption. The authors perceive that going to university for these families is ‘part of a normal biography, simply part of what people like us do, and often too obvious to articulate’, contrasting these with those from working class backgrounds, whose decisions are seen as ‘characterised by uncertainty, unfamiliarity, lack of knowledge and often confusion’ (Reay *et al.*, 2005:67). Moreover, the independent-school-educated young people’s parents or other family members had often had experience of education at high status universities, with attention here particularly being drawn to family experience of Oxford and Cambridge. This enabled them to give substantial and significant advice to the young people in relation to their own university applications.

Consequently, parents and other family members can be seen to have both an explicit and a more tacit influence on the decisions which their offspring make. In the case of middle class young people, this has a clear influence on their decision-making, rendering some options, such as university, as possible and, indeed, automatic, whereas others, such as leaving education at the age of sixteen, are virtually unthinkable. This can be contrasted to the experiences of those from less affluent backgrounds, for whom leaving school at the earliest possible opportunity remains the norm (Connell *et al.*, 1982; Reay *et al.*, 2005). However, whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the family’s social class background continues to have a highly significant effect on the decisions that he or she makes, it is important to consider the differences between individual young people and their families,

and the effect that this might have on the decisions that are made. These differences have unfortunately been neglected, and this is particularly true in the case of those who attend independent schools, who tend to be considered as a homogeneous whole in studies relating to the influence of social class on education.

Power (2001) raises this issue, and calls for more research to be carried out on the middle class in education. She argues that issues relating to social class cannot properly be explored without looking at the middle class as well as the working class. However, she finds there to be an absence of a sociology of the middle class¹², in particular in relation to the Sociology of Education. She does not suggest that the middle class are entirely absent from these accounts, but rather that they rarely form the focus of these studies, tending instead to be present only as a contrast to working class experiences. This has led to middle class students being homogenised in studies of social class and education, viewed as ‘much of a muchness’ (Power, 2001: 198), taking on characteristics only in contrast to those of the working class. She notes that in studies such as those by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) and Reay (1998), middle class families are seen to be strategic and calculating, selfishly guaranteeing their own children’s success to the detriment of others, whereas working class parents are seen as less selfish, and thus valorised. She notes that ‘While the working class is described warmly in terms of community and solidarity, the middle class is seen as calculating and competitive’ (*ibid*: 203). Power perceives that the aforementioned authors’ acknowledgement that the working class are

¹² In relation to social science research as a whole, Savage and Williams (2008) and Scott (2008) have noted that elite groups tend to have been neglected, and thus rendered invisible.

unfairly disadvantaged has led to the middle class being viewed as the perpetrators of this disadvantage.

Moreover, whilst Power has highlighted the neglect and homogenisation of the middle class as problematic in relation to studies of parental decision-making, it can also be identified in studies that focus on young people's decision-making at the level of Higher Education decision-making. Indeed, whilst studies by Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001) and Reay *et al.*, (2001; 2005) have gone some way towards addressing the neglect of the middle class in educational research, there has tended to be an oversimplification of intra-class distinctions. For instance, in drawing a contrast between the experiences of middle class young women from highly privileged backgrounds who attend independent schools and have considerable family experience of university, and working class young women who have no family experience of university, Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001) neglect the experience of those young people whose education and financial position place them in the middle class, but who have no family experience of university. Proweller's study (1998), based in the USA, does emphasise the distinctions between individual students and families who utilise independent schools in relation to family educational backgrounds and experience, as does Connell *et al.*'s (1982) study (based in Australia). but the aforementioned studies based in the UK have tended rather to focus on the similarities between young people attending independent schools. However, it is necessary to address distinctions within classes as well as between them. This is highlighted by New Class Theorists, who see class as consisting of several fractions which have their own distinct characteristics

and forms of consciousness, rather than earlier concepts of class which are based on the distinct identity of two oppositional classes (Bottero, 2004; Savage, 2000, 2003; Crompton and Scott, 2000). Savage (2000) for example, refers to there being multiple distinctions between people rather than clear-cut class boundaries. Moreover, the presence of divergent fractions within social classes is nothing new. Bernstein (1997) emphasised that there were fractions within classes, and, significantly for the current study, noted that one way in which these variations arose within the middle class was through differences between schools within the public (i.e. independent) school system, leading to differentiation in the form of socialisation experienced by young people. Furthermore, he highlighted a distinction between an ‘Old Middle Class’ and a ‘New Middle Class’, based on their varying relations to educational pedagogy and social reproduction.

Granted, Reay *et al.*, (2005) have attempted to address this idea of class as fragmented, drawing a distinction between the established middle class, who have considerable familial experience of Higher Education, and the newer or ‘novitiate’ middle class whose history of middle classness is shorter. Whilst transitions to Higher Education are seen as relatively unproblematic for those from the more established middle class, the novitiate middle class have to consistently strive hard, putting increased time, effort and money into their education in order to maintain their social class location. However, whilst this goes some way towards addressing the necessity to consider intra-class distinction, it falls down in its drawing of the distinction between ‘established’ and ‘novitiate’ groups by school type. Those attending independent schools are considered to all belong to the

established middle classes, whereas those middle class young people attending schools in the maintained sector rather belong to the novitiate middle class group.

Whilst Reay *et al.*'s study draws attention to intra-class distinction, it is problematic that the distinction is drawn predominantly at a school level, with those middle class young people who attend independent schools contrasted to those who attend schools and colleges in the maintained sector. The school attended is taken as a proxy for social class background, without consideration that young people within individual schools may differ markedly, for instance in terms of their parental background in education, and what this means for their own orientation towards education. By contrast, in an older study, by Delamont (1984b; 1989), the idea of diversity between young women within a single independent school was emphasised. In this study, Delamont focussed on St. Luke's, an independent school for girls in Scotland. She emphasised the differences between the young women at St. Luke's in terms of their parental educational and employment background, the social and extra-curricular activities in which they were involved, and their future ambitions, which led to divergences between these young women in relation to their subjects of study and future education, training and career-related decisions.

In Delamont's analysis, attention is largely drawn to two very different groups of young women who, while co-existing in the same school, utilised it very differently in their processes of cultural reproduction, and took away from it very different experiences. The first group, who were formed from the prospective social elite, were referred to pejoratively by

their classmates as the ‘debs and dollies’, on account of their social lives based around grouse shooting, hunt balls, dances and socialising with boys. These young women tended to have fathers working in highly paid entrepreneurial or managerial jobs, with their mothers frequently not working. They tended to see their own future roles as working in feminised occupations, such as teaching small children. On the other hand, the ‘swots and weeds’, as defined by their classmates because of their studious disposition and dislike for team sports, were the future intellectual elite. They had parents who tended to both be graduates, and possessed greater amounts of cultural and intellectual capital. They tended to be more enthusiastic about the academic offer of the school, and to perceive their own futures as attending prestigious universities away from the east of Scotland, and following professional or academic careers.

This emphasis on distinctions between students and their families within a school is one that has scarcely been drawn upon in other studies, with attention rather being predominantly drawn to differences between schools. However, it is notable that in a recent study by Pugsley (2004) of Higher Education decision-making, which drew contrasts between various schools and colleges in both the maintained and independent sectors, she presented boundaries between class fractions as not necessarily congruent with the educational institution attended. Although she characterised the majority of those who attended independent schools as coming from well-established middle class backgrounds, she also considered some of those attending (particularly middle class dominated) schools in the maintained sector to come from a similar background, with their decisions exhibiting

similar characteristics. Furthermore, Pugsley's study notably showed that not all parents who choose to educate their offspring in the independent sector are themselves graduates: for instance, one young woman in her study who attended a selective independent school and planned to go to Oxford University was the daughter of a policeman and a secretary who had had no university education. Furthermore, this study highlighted the financial struggle experienced by some families who utilise the independent sector of education, revealing that not all who use this sector are extremely wealthy.

Pugsley's study provides a laudable example of the consideration of diversity in middle class experience, histories and family educational backgrounds, and how this affected the roles of the student and family within the decision-making process. Indeed, attention has been drawn in some recent studies to the middle class decision-making process as diverse. Power (2001) has noted that although there is no doubt that, overall, middle class young people are more successful educationally than those from working class backgrounds, this success is by no means ubiquitous. Similarly, in an older study, Connell *et al.* (1982) have shown that some middle class young people rebel against the system and underachieve, with their parents' relatively affluent financial circumstances acting as a 'cushion' ensuring that they maintain their middle class social location. Intra-class diversity within the middle class is further illustrated by Power *et al.* (2003), who have shown that even for middle class, academically able young people, the university process is not always characterised by smooth transition, with a number of the young people in their study having changed

courses or universities, achieved lower-than-expected results or even dropped out of the education system altogether. Conjointly, Brooks' (2005) study of middle class young people attending a maintained sector Sixth Form college, whose parents had little or no experience of university, shows how considerable amounts of effort were required on the part of these students and their families, in order to gain sufficient knowledge of the university decision-making process and available options.

Consequently, it can be seen that for some young people from middle class backgrounds, the university decision-making process is not as smooth as it has been portrayed in some studies (Ball *et al.*, 2002, following Bourdieu, have described the decision-making processes for middle class young people as ‘moving through their world as fish through water’). Furthermore, university for some middle class young people is not, as Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) refer to it, ‘a rite of passage that most family members have undertaken’ but a new experience requiring considerable effort and preparation. Indeed, the studies by Delamont (1984; 1989), Pugsley (2004) and Power *et al.* (2003) form a significant contrast with some of the aforementioned studies of decision-making at this stage which include students from independent schools (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), where neither is the diversity of family backgrounds and educational experiences mentioned, nor is the possibility raised that there may be students within these schools whose families do not have considerable experience of Higher Education. Similarly, Brooks (2005), although focussing on students educated in the maintained sector, also draws attention to the diversity of students from middle class backgrounds.

She critiques the aforementioned studies for their claims to consider middle class experiences, when in fact only the experiences of a small and highly privileged group are discussed.

Certainly, middle class students whose experiences differ from this are plentiful, and this includes some of those students educated in independent schools. Indeed, a survey conducted by ISC in relation to families who utilise their member schools found that 40% of those who attend these schools are the first in their families to go to school in the independent sector. Similarly, studies of families who use the independent sector of education, carried out by West (1992), Johnson (1987) and Gorard (1997), revealed that many families are first-time users of the sector, and additionally, several of these parents were not university-educated.

Further intra-class distinction within the middle class was highlighted in Devine's (2004) study of two groups of middle class professionals, teachers and doctors, and the decisions that they made about their children's education. The doctors, who tended to come from more established middle class backgrounds, were well equipped to enable their children to retain their class position. The teachers, by contrast, held a middle class social location but their origins were in the working class. They tended to find their efforts to assist in their children's education to be characterised by significant levels of anxiety. In a similar connection, Allatt's (1993) study of middle class, independent school-using families demonstrated their perception of the need for 'constant purposeful activity' in order to maintain their social class location. This point is further drawn on by Power (2001) in order to note the difference between how middle

class families are portrayed in some studies as maintaining their position with ease, and the reality of constant work to maintain this position.

A demonstrable gap can thus be observed here, indicating the necessity to consider the middle class as a more diverse group than they have been presented in certain examples mentioned above. The diversity between classes has been suggested as a reason why social class should be discarded as a category for comparative research: however, Savage (2003, following Ball, 2003) has argued that this rather points towards the requirement for a new class paradigm, which encompasses such aspects of difference. Indeed, some authors in this field have suggested that social class needs to be expanded to encompass greater intra-class difference, with class analysis becoming increasingly individualised and fragmented (Bottero, 2004). Class relations can be seen to have changed dramatically in recent years, with a decline in the traditional working class concomitant with an increase in the numbers of people employed in professional and managerial occupations (Savage *et al.*, 1992). This rendered problematic the historical definition of the middle class, in which they were defined in comparison to those above (the aristocracy) and below (the traditional working class) (*ibid*). The focus of earlier class analysis on economic factors has also been dismissed as less than useful (Devine, 2004; Devine *et al.*, 2005; Devine and Savage, 2006).

Thus, new and wider definitions of the middle class are required, which take account of these changes. Power (2001) argues that we should more accurately refer to middle ‘classes’, owing to their diversity. In a similar connection, Devine’s (2004) aforementioned study draws attention

to intra-class distinction dependent on one's history of middle class-ness and individual background in education and employment. Likewise, Crompton (1992) draws attention to the diversity of influences on social class consciousness and their effect on educational decision-making, namely family origin and social class background, family experience of Higher Education, and gender. Savage *et al.*, (1992) draw a distinction between business owners, the professional middle class and the managerial middle class, seeing property, bureaucracy and culture as salient factors in determining to which group one belongs and thus one's class consciousness.

Further to this, in a study of educational decision-making by students in a Sixth Form college, Brooks (2005) draws a distinction between the middle class students in previous studies (such as Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), who aspired to recreate their parents' privileged social locations, and the middle class students in her own study, whom she refers to as occupying 'liminal' middle class positions and desiring to improve their social location relative to their parents. This concept of liminality, which arises from the anthropological work of Turner (1967) and describes a time 'betwixt and between' two stable structural conditions, is one which is taken up in the current study in reference to those young women whose length of relationship to the middle class was shorter and relatively unstable. By contrast, I refer to those whose connection to the middle class was more lengthy and secure as the 'established' middle class.¹³

Social class can therefore be understood as a category that has undergone significant change in recent years. Studies of educational

¹³ These concepts will be addressed in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

decision-making highlight the continued pertinence of class differences for one's decisions, life chances and experiences. However, recognition of the limitations of the crude categories of 'working class' and 'middle class' due to the recognition of divergence between individuals within these groups points to the need for a more fractional notion of social class. Nevertheless, social class (and other structural factors such as education and ability) remain pertinent. Linking this position to a discursive construction whereby individual decision-making ensues from discourses inherent within the structural location that one inhabits is a key area of consideration within my thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted key gaps in the currently available literature, which this thesis intends to address in its exploration of the young women at Midham School as decision-makers. Attention has been drawn to the necessity to consider as influential both individualised, subjective decision-making agency, and structural factors such as gender and social class, with respect to decision-making in education. It is considered possible to transcend this dichotomy by looking at discourses of gender and social class as mediated through structures such as the home and the school, and how these are taken up in various ways by individuals. In the latter part of the chapter, structural factors were considered in more depth, and notable absences highlighted with respect to the impact of gender and social class on educational decision-making. Of particular note here is that the concept

of social class as a simple bifurcation between the working class and middle class is refuted, with the middle class shown to be characterised by diversity rather than homogeneity. These issues will be explored further in chapters 3-6, which present and analyse the data collected at Midham School. Before this, though, Chapter 2 will provide a discussion of how the research itself was carried out.

Chapter 2: Carrying out Research at Midham School

Introduction

The identification of issues and gaps in currently available research is highly pertinent when deciding on a research area, and, furthermore, when considering what is an appropriate methodology to adopt when carrying out the research. The previous chapter explored these gaps, providing a review of available literature in the field of educational decision-making and independent schools. Moreover, it was highlighted that a discourse-based perspective has been adopted in this study, as this perspective is considered to be informative in relation to how subjective, agentic individuals make decisions within specific structural locations.

This chapter will move on to discuss the methodological aspects of my research study, showing how access was gained to particular discourses. By engaging in and deconstructing particular discourses, it is possible to highlight the social, political, economic and historical context of these discourses, as well as why some meanings become dominant and others more subordinate (Hughes, 2002a). This enables a greater awareness of how individuals become engaged with particular discourses, and how these affect who they are and what they might become (*ibid.*).

When considering issues of research design, the interconnected relationship between problem, theory and method (Burgess, 1991) is highly significant. The interwoven nature of these three elements means that it is impossible to separate them. The area that one wishes to find out about is

naturally linked to the theoretical knowledge about the area of research that is already in existence, and beliefs about how it is best to further this knowledge. Similarly, Denzin (1997) emphasises the inseparability of theory, writing and ethnography, pointing towards the necessity of a mutually influential relationship between theory and ethnography: what we do and the decisions we make in the research setting are inextricably linked to the theory which ensues. Furthermore, Skeggs (1997) has raised the point that methodology is itself a theory of methods, and this informs a range of issues including who and how to study, which practices are to be adopted, and which knowledge to draw on. Questions have further been raised in relation to how researchers formulate their account of the social world: that is, whose view is presented in the writing up of ethnographic fieldwork, and whether we are reading the meaning that an action is given by those in the setting, or rather, the interpretation that is put upon it by the researcher (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Spencer, 2001). A focus on those within the setting, and the realities they experience, is thus crucial to research.

The gap in current research about the middle classes outlined in the previous chapter (which Power, 2001, defines as an empirical gap) is also, by connection, one of theoretical proportion. Since little empirical work has specifically focussed on the middle class and their education, much theoretical work that deals with this subject area is necessarily reliant on a sparse background literature. This points to the necessity for further empirical work in this area, in order that these theoretical assertions can be made in the light of more in-depth research.

Hence, the decision to carry out the present study, a qualitative study of an independent school, to which I have given the pseudonym ‘Midham School’. The school itself is first introduced, along with a brief consideration of why a study of this particular school can be considered particularly informative and how it addresses gaps in the currently available literature. Next are detailed emergent issues surrounding access and participation in the field, the former drawing particularly on my experiences from my early days researching at Midham, and the latter on my role within the research setting. This leads into a discussion of the role of the self in the research process. Next, my data collection methods are discussed, including interviews, short questionnaires, observations and documentary analysis. Finally, consideration is given to issues relating to voice in research, and ethical issues relating to research with young people.

Midham School: Background and Context

Midham School is a non-selective, single sex independent school, located in an affluent part of the English Midlands. Founded in 1884, and formerly a boarding school, Midham now caters for day pupils only, girls from the ages of three to 18, and boys up to the age of seven. It is housed in three large Victorian buildings, plus some modern extensions, within walking distance of the centre of the moderately sized town in which it lies. These three buildings house the different departments of the school: the Junior School and Early Years Unit; the Senior School and the Sixth Form. Whilst the transition between departments is made at the same time as in

schools in the maintained sector, with pupils moving into the Senior School at age eleven and the Sixth Form at age sixteen, the names of the year groups differ from those which are standard within the National Curriculum.

The names for the year groups in the Senior School and Sixth Form, on which this research focuses, are detailed in figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Year Groups at Midham (Senior School and Sixth Form)

National Curriculum Year	Name of year group at Midham School
Year 7	Upper Third
Year 8	Lower Fourth
Year 9	Upper Fourth
Year 10	Lower Fifth
Year 11	Upper Fifth
Year 12	Lower Sixth
Year 13	Upper Sixth

The county in which Midham School is located has a divided education system for those aged eleven and above. Parts of the county retain the eleven-plus examination, with grammar schools for the more academic students and comprehensive schools for those who do not pass (or are not entered for) the eleven-plus. Other parts of the county, including those immediately local to Midham, have a fully comprehensive system for 11-16 year olds, with Sixth Form colleges for those who wish to remain in education after the age of sixteen. The school's league table position in 2005, when I carried out my research, was that it was 9th in the county out of 42 schools, with 89% of pupils gaining 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, and 13th out of 29 schools and colleges at A Level, with an average points score of 284.4. Schools with a higher performance were all either selective independent schools or selective grammar schools at GCSE, although at A

Level, it was further outperformed by three comprehensive schools. Midham itself was not a selective school, and consequently had a wide intake of students. Indeed, students tended to have either failed the eleven-plus examination or the entrance examination to a more prestigious and selective independent school, or else their parents had decided that the academic rigours of these schools were unsuitable for them.¹⁴ There was, however, clearly a case of social selectivity in the school, with fee levels in 2005 of £2240 per term for Reception and Key Stage 1, rising to £2840 per term for the senior school and Sixth Form, putting it beyond the reach of most working-class, and indeed, many middle-class parents.

Thus, Midham School can be seen to be notable on account of exhibiting considerable deviation from the independent schools presented in some previous research studies (which in many cases are highly selective schools) and, indeed, in lay discourse in relation to these schools. Walford (2003a) has highlighted that the majority of schools in the independent sector are day schools, and many are co-educational: ‘Eton and Harrow are now even more at the extreme of the private sector than they were – each being one of the only schools for male boarders only’ (Walford, 2003:2). In a similar connection, Gorard (1998) warns against the assumption that the most prestigious and high profile schools are characteristic of the independent sector, noting that the sector is in fact far more diverse than this.

From my reading and reviewing of the literature in the field of educational decision-making and independent schools, as detailed in my

¹⁴ I will return to this point in my data chapters.

previous chapter, I identified significant gaps, and this included a lack of recent and detailed research on schools in the independent sector. Where research did include independent schools, those discussed were predominantly academically selective schools, attended by young people from highly privileged backgrounds. As I detailed in the previous chapter, this is not representative of the whole independent sector or its users. Furthermore, whilst there are classic studies providing a focus on individual schools available within the Sociology of Education, such as those of a boys' grammar school (Lacey, 1971), a secondary modern school (Hargreaves, 1967) and comprehensive schools (Ball, 1981; Burgess, 1983), comparable studies of a girls' grammar school (Lambart, 1976, 1997) and a girls' independent school (Delamont, 1984b, 1989, 2002) remain unpublished as a whole. Similarly, whilst Connell et al (1982) studied two girls' independent schools as part of their comparative study of secondary schooling in Australia, this study may be considered less relevant on account of being a relatively old study, based in an Australian rather than a British context, and providing a broad focus on several schools rather than a detailed focus on one school; whereas Proweller's (1998) study, whilst more recent and providing an in-depth focus on a single school, nevertheless is based in the United States, therefore limiting its relevance to the British context and audience.

Thus can be seen a notable gap in available knowledge in this area. Indeed, in a piece in which she reflected on her own research, Delamont (1984a) noted that there was no published study of a girls' school which

could be used by a research student studying ‘St. Luke’s’¹⁵ at that time, and from my review of the currently available literature in my previous chapter, it is evident that this notable exception remains today. Hence, the identification of a gap in currently available literature, which is addressed in the present study.

Access

The gaining and maintaining of access is a highly significant factor when carrying out research. Access was of utmost importance when carrying out my research, due to its necessary grounding in empirical data: as Burgess (1991) notes, without access, there would be no research study. The negotiation of access is far from simple, with access to particular aspects of the school negotiated at different times and through different ‘gatekeepers’ (Burgess, 1991). Burgess has further noted that in the context of research within a school, access may also not involve just one person, as while access to a school is generally obtained through the Headteacher, access to other aspects within the school may be gained through others within the school, such as teachers, other school staff such as administrators, or even pupils. Gatekeepers, who have the power to grant or deny access to the research setting or particular aspects of it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) are necessarily a key aspect of the strategy of gaining access, with their negotiation crucial to the amount of control which the researcher can exercise over her own research (May, 1997). Moreover, access is not

¹⁵ A pseudonym for the school in which Delamont carried out her research.

something which is negotiated at one stage only, but rather, these negotiations are ‘likely to be continuing, and may even be continuous and continual’ (Delamont, 2002:101). Further to this, access to particular discourses within the school setting may be gained at different times and in varying ways. These factors are important to consider in relation to this research.

It has been acknowledged that the gaining of access to study schools in the independent sector presents a particular difficulty to researchers (Walford, 1987, 2006; Gorard, 1997; Johnson, 1987). These schools can be regarded as a politically sensitive area, and it is therefore unsurprising that ‘schools in the private sector might not welcome research conducted in the sensitive areas of recruitment, market image and reputation’ (Gorard, 1997: 102). Whilst these areas were not the main topic of my research, my focus on decision-making in education meant that such issues necessarily arose, and this necessitated a degree of diplomacy, particularly in the initial stages of access negotiation.

Wary of the difficulties experienced by others who have wished to carry out research in this sector, as outlined at the start of this section, I began my access negotiations at an early stage. An early start was essential, as I wanted to gain a substantial level of access to a school, and its teachers, students and events, over a period of one whole academic year. As I wanted to start my fieldwork at the beginning of the Autumn term in 2004, I began my access negotiations with schools six months prior to this, in March 2004.

My initial access negotiations involved writing a letter¹⁶ to the Headteachers of a number of independent schools in the local area. I had found contact details for these schools on the website of the Independent Schools Council (ISC). Following Delamont's (2002: 100) recommendations that initial letters should be 'brief, clear, and at the same time vague', I gave a general idea of the research topic in these letters and requested an initial meeting with the Head in order that I could discuss my research plans further with them. Further to this, I briefly outlined my own educational background and credentials in these letters, a point to which I will return later in the chapter. These initial letters yielded a small number of responses, and meetings were set up in the Spring and / or early Summer term of 2004 with key members of staff in three schools: Midham School; Padley High, a large co-educational independent school located in a multi-ethnic city location; and Fenwick, a very small independent school in a suburban location which was predominantly attended by young people with special educational needs. Whilst all of these schools were interesting in their own right, it became clear after carrying out some early fieldwork in all three schools, involving initial meetings and brief interviews with key members of staff, that Midham School would not only afford me the greatest degree of access to lessons, staff and students (which will be discussed further later in this chapter), but that it also had the potential for significant interest and value as a case for study, on account of its non-selective and single-sex nature. Therefore I decided to focus on Midham as the main school in my study. However, I did continue to utilise Padley

¹⁶ A copy of this letter is included as Appendix 1

High in order to pilot my questionnaires and interview schedules, a point that I will return to in my discussion of my research methods later in this chapter.

My first meeting at Midham School took place in late March, 2004, just prior to the start of the school Easter holidays. In response to my initial letter, I was contacted by the school, in order to arrange a meeting with the Head, Mrs. Sheila Holmes-Brown. Her role in this instance was that of an initial ‘gatekeeper’ to the setting, with her position as Head of the school giving her the power of ultimate arbitration over my access to the school. This initial meeting yielded a positive response, both in terms of the school’s potential interest in my research (and consequently, their willingness to accommodate my research) and furthermore, in terms of the school’s relevance as an interesting case study that differed from some of the currently available studies of the independent sector that I had read. Sheila Holmes-Brown told me that a significant issue arising at Midham at the time was that a large number of the students attending the school considered leaving at the age of sixteen. I found this particularly interesting, as in studies of schooling in the independent sector, it has been considered that students who leave school at the age of sixteen are not the norm (Roker, 1993; Power *et al.*, 2003). At Midham, the Head attributed this to the possibility that the young women may want to experience a co-educational environment, or to study more vocational courses (the school Sixth Form offered only AS and A2 Level qualifications¹⁷, largely in

¹⁷ The reform of the A level curriculum, introduced into schools in September 2000, meant that the traditional 2 year A level course was split into 6 modules, with the first 3 modules, taken in the first year of study, making up a qualification called AS level (Advanced

traditional academic subjects). For this reason, she anticipated that my results would be of significant interest to her. Consequently, she invited me to prepare a more detailed proposal for the research that I wanted to do in the school, which I was to send to her via her secretary, at the start of the following term.

However, this was but one of the many layers of access negotiation that I had to go through in order to conduct my research, thus drawing connection with writings on access which emphasise this as encompassing a continual process of negotiation (Delamont, 2002; Burgess, 1991). After I had sent this proposal to Mrs. Holmes-Brown, I received a letter from her in May 2004, highlighting concerns that she had about my research, in relation to its scale and potential disruption to the school. In particular, she highlighted concerns which had been raised by the school's Careers teacher, Mrs. Kathryn Williams, in relation to the scope and scale of my research, and its possible intrusiveness for school staff and students. Eager to dispel these concerns, and keen that my potential research access would not be restricted or curtailed, I replied, suggesting a further meeting with both Mrs. Holmes-Brown and Mrs. Williams, in order that we could discuss my research further.

This meeting took place later in the Summer term of 2004. On account of the concerns that had been raised in relation to my research, I went along with the expectation of having to compromise on at least some issues. During this meeting, however, it became evident that Kathryn Williams was in fact very interested in my work, and willing to help me,

Subsidiary Level). The final three modules are taken at the end of the second year of Sixth Form study, and make up the A2 level.

whereas Sheila Holmes-Brown seemed to be the one who was actually more concerned about it. Furthermore, as we discussed and negotiated aspects of my research, Mrs. Holmes-Brown suggested several further ideas which were not dissimilar to those that I had made in my proposal. Realising that agreeing with these suggestions was likely to gain me access to study the things that I wanted to, I decided to acquiesce.

As a consequence of this meeting, I exchanged personal contact details with Kathryn Williams, who invited me to email her after the Summer holidays with a view to my starting my research in the school at the beginning of the Autumn term in 2004. Initial access was granted to carry out my research over the course of one term in the school, consisting of a small number of interviews with key staff members and Sixth Form students, as well as observations of some key events within the school such as the Open Day.

However, I was later able to expand my access, spending almost a complete academic year in the school¹⁸, which relates to the assertion by Delamont that ‘frequently, it transpires that [...] it is possible to do much more than the gatekeepers promised or expected’ (Delamont, 2002: 101). Indeed, the aforementioned assertion by Burgess (1991) that once initial access to the school is secured through the Head, further access is secured through others within the school can be considered relevant here. Through

¹⁸ I visited Midham School on a regular basis between October 2004 and May 2005. Towards the end of May 2005 I was told that, as the Sixth Form students were soon to begin their AS and A level examinations, they would not be having any more Careers lessons or talks, and that there would be nothing else going on which would be of relevance to my research. It was clear from such dialogue that the teachers at Midham felt that my presence would be a distracting influence at this crucial time in these students’ education, so I considered that the best option for me was to withdraw from the school at this point, in order not to harm relationships with the school or students.

my fostering of close contact with Kathryn Williams as a key informant in the research setting, via regular meetings, telephone calls and emails, I was able to negotiate continued access to the school. Kathryn was a key figure in the lives of many of the students in the Sixth Form, who was very committed to helping the students with their choices and university applications, and was liked and well-respected by the students. In the early days of my research, Kathryn informed me of key events that were occurring within the school that might be relevant to my research, such as Careers talks and Open Days, and furthermore introduced me to other teachers, enabling me to build up networks of contacts. Her role as Careers teacher meant that she worked closely with other teachers who had a key role in the students' decision-making processes, such as Ms. Pauline Denham (the Head of Sixth Form), Mrs. Veronica Smalley (the Head of Upper Fifth), and Mrs. Linda Johnson, the school's marketing coordinator. Consequently, she was able to introduce me to all of these key figures, which not only facilitated my carrying out detailed interviews with them, but also widened my knowledge of the school and its key events, and gave me access to other events in which they were involved. Further to this, Kathryn facilitated my introduction to the students, by arranging for me to give a short talk to the Sixth Form about my research and the potential role that they could play in this.

Initially my attendance in the school was on an occasional rather than a regular basis. I visited the school around once a week, for initial meetings and interviews with Kathryn Williams or other relevant teachers, or on occasions when there was a relevant event, such as a talk or open day.

to which I was invited. At this point my access to the school and students remained rather limited, and I did not have regular days or times for visiting the school. Rather, I tended to be reliant on Kathryn Williams (or occasionally other teachers) inviting me to relevant events, and I had to make appointments to go into the school in order to speak to members of school staff.

However, through meeting and talking to some of the students at one of the events (a ‘forum’ event, where students from the Upper Fifth were invited to talk to Sixth Formers about their AS and A level options) I was able to establish a way of gaining access to the school on a more regular basis, and thus establish and validate an increased and more regular presence within the school. I was invited to this forum event by Veronica Smalley, who had organised it, and two Upper Sixth students, Allie and Nicole¹⁹, had been told to show me around. I spoke to both of these students informally about the decisions that they had made so far regarding their A level and university choices, and during this discussion, they mentioned the regular Careers lessons which they had in the Sixth Form, suggesting that I might find these interesting as they frequently centred around choice-making. It transpired that these students would attend a Careers lesson after the forum event, and they invited me to come along with them. I checked at the start of the lesson with Kathryn Williams that I was permitted to stay and observe. At the end of the lesson, Kathryn expressed her concern that I would have found the lesson uninteresting, but I confirmed to her that, in fact, I felt the opposite, and that attending these

¹⁹ Both of these students, along with several of their friendship group, later took part in in-depth interviews.

lessons could provide useful background information for my research. After a brief discussion of this, she told me that she was happy for me to attend and observe her careers lessons for the Sixth Form. These lessons took place fortnightly, with each year-group split into two classes, which alternated. Each lesson would be taught first to one class, and then repeated the next week for the alternating group. I aimed to attend at least one of each lesson, sometimes attending both: this meant that I was in school at least once, and usually twice every week, as well as the days I came in to attend other events or to interview the teachers or students. I attended fifteen Careers lessons overall in my time at Midham, as well as other institutional events such as Open Evenings (for the whole school, and for the Sixth Form), and a Forum event for Upper Fifth pupils which focussed on Sixth Form option choices. Further to this, I tended to arrive at the school a few minutes before the start of each lesson, giving me time to go into the staffroom and talk informally with members of school staff, and after these lessons I would frequently talk extensively with Kathryn Williams about the lesson content, any recent developments which had occurred, and any forthcoming significant events. I also occasionally had the opportunity to speak briefly with students either before or after the lesson, which enabled me to further build up an informal picture of what life was like at Midham and how these students' decision-making was progressing, as well as enabling me to build up a rapport with students and encourage them to partake in my interviews. This meant that I gained an increased level of access not previously envisaged, which enabled the

collection of richer data and helped to further contextualise the school's influence on the young women's choices.

Participation in the Field: The Role of the Self in the Research Setting

The adoption of a reflexive standpoint, considering one's own characteristics and how these relate not only to the information that the researcher can gain access to, but also to the interpretation and meaning that she may give to events, is significant here, with the idea of an invisible and omniscient narrator (as in some early anthropological work) now manifestly outmoded (Spencer, 2001). Thus, the embodiment, presentation and role adopted by the researcher in the research setting is highly significant, and has an important influence on the types of information which s/he can gain access to. This not only relates to the role which the researcher adopts, but also to aspects relating to his/her personal background (social class, educational background), and appearance (clothing, gender, age). When researchers have carried out research in the independent sector of education, it has often been the case that they have been able to draw on their own personal experiences and prior connections in their negotiations of access. Looking at the wider field of research on the powerful and elite groups, Walford (2003b) has argued that it helps if one is backed up by personal experience or contacts within the sector. Further authentication is afforded to the research if it is connected to a respected university, and supported by a prestigious funding body. Indeed, the relationship between researcher biography and the selection of a fieldwork site is highly relevant, both in respect to the initial choice of a subject area to research (Lofland and

Lofland, 1995) and the gaining of access to particular settings (Burgess, 1991).

This has been the case with some examples of prior research in this area. Walford (1987), when writing about gaining access to carry out research in boys' public boarding schools, noted that although his own education had taken place in the maintained sector, he had been employed as a teacher in a boys' public school. He further speculated that, had this not been the case, it might have been more difficult for him to gain access in order to conduct his research. Gorard (1997) had similar circumstances, also being a former teacher in an independent school: in his case, one of the schools that he used in his study. Delamont (1984) also considers the impact of her own education in this way: the Head of St. Luke's had, similarly to Delamont, been educated at Girton College, Cambridge, and she considers that this was influential in her being allowed to carry out research in the school without difficulty.

I was able to utilise my own educational background and connections in this way in the negotiation of access to Midham School. When I initially wrote to independent schools requesting meetings with the Heads to discuss potential access (as discussed in the previous section), I emphasised my connection to the University of Warwick and my funding by the Economic and Social Research Council, thus drawing attention to these credentials in providing authentication for my research (Walford, 1994). Furthermore, I included details of my own education at an independent school for girls, this revealing myself to be an 'insider' to the world of independent schools. This proved useful in obtaining initial access to the

research setting. For instance, in my initial meetings with the Head of Midham School, Sheila Holmes-Brown, prior to commencing my research, she asked me about my own schooling, and this further led her to draw attention to points such as that Midham was a much smaller school than the one that I attended. Thus my ‘insider knowledge’ led to the illumination of specific points, which may not have occurred had I not revealed my own experiences. Similarly, with other members of staff at Midham, I always introduced myself as being ‘from the University of Warwick’, and I usually mentioned my own educational background during informal discussion. Again, this not only authenticated my research, but also showed that my own position was not antipathetic to the independent sector. This also frequently led to discussion with members of staff in relation to issues such as the varying types of independent school, and changes in the sector in recent years, which provided useful background knowledge and proved informative to my research.

I also drew on and revealed my own experiences in the independent sector when I met and interacted with students. When I began my research at the school, I gave a short talk to the Sixth Form about my research topic, and their potential involvement in it. In this talk, I mentioned my own school and university experience, and I believe that this aided the generation of rapport through our shared experiences (Puwar, 1997) in my later interactions with students, who on occasion asked me about my school and university, and my own experiences of the university application process.

These aspects of my own background therefore can be seen to have proved useful both in respect to my gaining of initial access to the research

setting, and further, in gaining access to particular types of information within the school. However, familiarity with the field can also lead to difficulties. Although usually, the researcher new to the field can adopt a role of an ‘acceptable incompetent’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1995), novice or new recruit (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), research in a relatively familiar location may be difficult due to having to act as competent, whilst also having to suspend pre-conceived ideas about the setting (*ibid*). Indeed, this was the case at Midham, where I did find in some instances that revealing my own background and experience of the independent sector of education meant that, particularly amongst some members of staff, it was assumed that I had particular knowledge, and indeed, that I was something of an ‘expert’ in the field. This led to difficulties, as although I do have some knowledge of independent schools, I was aware of the considerable diversity among schools in the sector (Gorard, 1997; Walford, 2003a) and I wanted to find out more about how this particular school functioned. Consequently, I sometimes had to ask questions regarding areas about which they assumed I already had knowledge. Furthermore, as my initial access letters had referred to my contacting several (unnamed) local independent schools about my research, certain members of staff believed me to have extensive knowledge of other schools in the area, particularly those that they considered as their rivals. This was problematic particularly in my early days within the field, when I was trying to maintain relationships with several local schools in case my research at Midham did not work out. Accordingly, I had promised anonymity and confidentiality to the schools that I had contacted, and so any discussion of other local schools

would have been inappropriate. I did, however, find myself being ‘tested’ on a small number of occasions, when teachers asked me whether I had been to named schools in the course of my research, or which other schools I had been to. Similar issues came up in interviews and conversations with the young women. They sometimes asked whether I would also be interviewing anyone from Princess Charlotte High, a local, highly selective girls’ school, which they tended to perceive as their ‘rivals’. In these situations, I would raise the issue of the confidentiality of my research, and I would also try to appear unknowing if a teacher or student told me anything about another local school, regardless of whether I was aware of the matter or not.

As well as my educational background and experience, I feel that my own personal physical characteristics (such as appearance, gender and age) had a significant influence on the way in which I was perceived, the role I was able to adopt, and the discourses to which I was able to gain access within the research setting. This has been highlighted by Skeggs (1997), who notes that the way in which we are socially located (in terms of gender, social class, age, race, sexuality, history and so on) informs our access to particular discourses and positions of conceivability (that is, what we can envisage and what we perceive to be possible). This inevitably has an effect on the research that one can do, and what one considers to be legitimate and relevant knowledge. In this connection, Coffey (1999) has considered the body to be a highly significant factor in research, with aspects of the researcher such as their clothing and the appearance of their bodies as locating them as either part of, or distinct from, the social world which they

wish to study: ‘What our body looks like, how it is perceived and used can impact upon access, field roles and field relationships’ (Coffey, 1999: 68). Coffey has noted that how one presents oneself in terms of demeanour, and also clothing, hair and makeup affects the impression that those inhabiting the research setting are likely to form, and may indeed affect the research access afforded. Furthermore, Coffey has considered that not only does the researcher impact on the research, but the research impacts upon, and indeed constitutes, the researcher, with fieldwork research playing a role in the creation of the self and one’s personal identity as a researcher. Moreover, whilst aspects such as the role adopted, and the researcher’s appearance and self presentation can be controlled and managed by the researcher, other aspects cannot be altered, and these also have a clear impact on the research: ‘such characteristics as gender, age, ‘race’ and ethnic identification may shape relationships with gatekeepers, sponsors and people under study in important ways’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 92).

With respect to my appearance, for my initial meetings with Sheila Holmes-Brown and Kathryn Williams at Midham School, I wore a smart and conservative outfit: a black trouser-suit and blouse, shoes with heels, minimal jewellery and a small amount of makeup. I chose this outfit carefully, as I was eager to give the impression of being smart, capable and respectable: someone who would fit in to the school environment well and who, if granted access, would carry out the research in a professional manner. When I had been granted access, I began to relax in what I wore, generally wearing a fairly smart top and trousers or a skirt, often with a jacket. I made this change because I realised that few of the teachers

dressed in suits, and none of the young women did (in the Sixth Form, they were not required to wear school uniform) so I would have looked quite unusual and slightly out of place had I done so. Furthermore, I wanted to maintain a smart appearance, particularly when I met with teachers, but did not want to appear ‘stuffy’ in front of the students. Similarly to Delamont, who wore a long coat when meeting the Head of the independent school in which she was researching, concealing her more fashionable outfit, to be worn in front of the students, underneath (1984; 2002), I tended to dress in a more relaxed manner when meeting with small groups of students alone, putting on a smarter jacket when I met with teachers.

Moreover, with respect to the aspects that I could not control (that is, gender, ethnicity, social class background and age) I felt that, as a white, British, middle class female, I was able to ‘fit in’ at Midham School relatively easily, as the regular inhabitants of the setting (teachers and students) on the whole were broadly similar to myself. Very few students, and none of the teachers whom I met, were from non-white or non-British backgrounds. Additionally, all of the students whom I met in the school were female, as were the vast majority of the teachers.²⁰

However, my age distinguished me from both students and teachers: I was in my mid-twenties, whereas the students I worked with were aged sixteen to eighteen, and the majority of teachers were in their forties or fifties. My relative closeness in age to the students meant that I had experienced similar processes to them (that is, Sixth Form and University choices) in the not-too-distant past, and I feel that they were able to relate to

²⁰ There were a small number of boys in the early years section of the school (aged under seven years).

me in this respect, thus generating rapport. For instance, occasionally students asked me on an informal level about my own university applications, or about my experiences at the University of Warwick, where a small number of these students hoped to apply.

Furthermore, the informal nature of my interviews with students means that I could talk to them about my own experiences, and this sometimes generated greater rapport. For instance, in one interview, with Lauren and Hayley, Lauren was talking about her family's previous experience with university and the help that they had given her with her choices, when Hayley nervously raised the point that she would be the first in her family to go to university. When I told her that I was also the first in my family to go to university, she became far less reticent and more comfortable to open up about her own experiences. Indeed, I felt that rapport with those in the research setting ensued not only from having our gender in common (Oakley, 1981) but also from our shared experiences (Puwar, 1997) of independent school education and of choosing to stay on into the Sixth Form and go to university. Generation of rapport in this way afforded me access to particular discourses, which may not have been available to a researcher with a different history or of a different age or gender to myself.

My own personal characteristics also affected the role that I was able to take up within the research setting. Within classroom settings, my primary role was that of an observer, in Careers lessons and other school events such as Careers Talks and Open Days. It would have been impossible for me to adopt any other role: I have no teaching qualifications

or experience besides undergraduate seminars and volunteering as a Teaching Assistant in a primary school, and no Careers Guidance experience or qualifications, consequently, the observer's role was the only one open to me. Furthermore, in the classroom situation, the student's role is largely that of an observer to the teacher's 'performance' (Goffman, 1990), meaning that this was the closest way I could get to finding out the student experience of these lessons.

In the room where Careers lessons took place, for instance, the desks were arranged in a horse-shoe shape. I tended to take one of the student desks located towards the side of the room, near the front, as this meant that I could observe the students and the teacher during the lesson. In talks, which often occurred in the Sixth Form common room, I would sit towards the side or back of the room. This meant that my presence did not interrupt the setting any more than was necessary, and I was able to observe the event in as natural a way as possible, enabling me to collect data without altering the impact of the event in any way.

There were, however, a number of times when I was required to play a more participatory role in the classroom setting. In my initial negotiations for access to the school, I mentioned that I was willing to speak and give advice to any of the students who might be interested in studying Sociology at university level. One of Kathryn Williams' Careers sessions was about choosing subjects to study at university, and this included a discussion of studying subjects that are not available in school. She asked me if I would mind speaking briefly about Sociology as a university subject, which I was happy to do. On other occasions, Kathryn asked me about my own

experiences and knowledge of the University of Warwick and its processes and procedures (for instance, in relation to attitudes to gap years). In situations such as this, I always made it clear that I was not an expert on the subject and that my answers were from my own experience. Inevitably, though, as a current university student in my mid-twenties, I had recent experience of university, therefore, she clearly thought that my opinions would be relevant, and so occasionally addressed questions of this nature to me. I did try, however, to avoid giving anything that would seem like advice to the students – I was there to observe them, not in a teaching or advisory role, so it was not my place to do so.²¹ Beside this, as I wished to observe the Careers advice that the young women were given within the school, offering advice of my own would have altered that. Whilst it is impossible for the researcher to have no impact on the research setting, I wanted as far as possible to not change this fundamental aspect of my research.

Collection of Research Data

In the present study, research data were gathered using a mixed-method approach. Four different methods of data collection were used: analysis of documentary sources such as the school's marketing materials and handouts which were given to students during careers lessons; observation of careers lessons and institutional events; student

²¹ Pugsley (2004) similarly tried to avoid offering specific advice to the students whom she interviewed, but in one instance chose to step out of the researcher role in order to offer advice to a young woman who was experiencing difficulties in relation to her university application.

questionnaires; and in-depth semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. This section will first discuss the use of the mixed-method approach to data collection, before moving on to consider each of these techniques in turn.

The idea of utilising a combination of types of research when gathering data is one that has increased in prominence in recent years. Indeed, mixed method research has begun to be seen as a distinctive approach to carrying out research in its own right (Creswell, 2003; Tashakori and Teddlie, 2003; Bryman, 2006). Arguments against combining methods, raised on epistemological or ontological grounds, are now brought forward less frequently than in the past (Bryman, 2006). For instance, rather than arguing for their different epistemological and ontological bases rendering the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in one study incompatible, Punch (2005) instead considers that the difference between the two approaches in terms of how they collect and analyse data should not obscure the similarities in logic behind them which make it possible to combine approaches. Moreover, he considers that the purposes of the two types of research can, in some instances, be seen to overlap. Although quantitative research has been generally considered to have a more deductive approach to hypotheses and theories, with qualitative research offering a more inductive approach to theory generation, Punch considers that there is no reason why these approaches cannot be used in different ways. For instance, although quantitative research is generally used for testing theories, he notes that it can also be used to provide an initial exploration of an area, and generate initial hypotheses and theory,

which can be a precursor to a more extensive qualitative study. Furthermore, he notes that neither qualitative nor quantitative research should be seen as superior to the other, as each approach has its own associated strengths and weaknesses, which should be considered in the light of decision-making regarding which method to use to investigate a particular issue or problem: ‘Our task is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each, to analyse any particular research situation in the light of those strengths and weaknesses, and to select the approach, or combination of approaches, on the basis of that analysis’ (Punch, 2005:236). He considers that adopting such a pragmatic approach to methods allows for a less stereotyped view of methods to emerge, allowing for the possibility of adopting either or both approaches.

Furthermore, Walford (2001) has noted that to gain an appreciation of a research setting in its many dimensions, different types of data must be generated, including interviews, observations, quantitative work and cultural artefacts, stating that the use of multiple methods leads to increased validity of the research findings. Similarly, Delamont (2002) notes that using a triangulatory approach, whereby multiple methods are used in order to supplement and reinforce what has been found, has been considered to afford strength to research. Indeed, triangulation, an epistemological claim which sees the use of two or more research methods as enabling the researcher to conclude whether their measurement of a particular phenomenon has been accurate has been considered to be a particular strength of using multiple methods, with the two terms ‘multiple methods’ and ‘triangulation’ becoming increasingly elided (Moran-Ellis et al, 2006).

However, Moran-Ellis et al have noted that the meaning of triangulation has been extended by some authors, who have used multiple methods in order to encompass the complex and multi-faceted nature of the phenomena under investigation (Boaler, 1997; Nash, 2002). In this connection, Mason has argued that the adoption of a mixed-method approach to research allows for the researcher to capture the ‘multi-dimensional reality’ (2006:12) of what is taking place in a particular social situation, perceiving that observing the situation from only one dimension leads to an impoverished view. Rather, she adopts the epistemological position that social lives are multi-dimensional, and that they are lived, experienced and enacted in ways that encompass both the macro and the micro, the individual and the cultural, and so on. Mason considers that the research methods which we use to investigate this multi-dimensional experience need to take this complexity into account, and this leads to her advocating the use of mixed research methods.

I took up a similar perspective to this when deciding on the methods which I would use in carrying out my research at Midham School. Theoretically, my research encompassed aspects of both structural and agency-based approaches, seeing individual agentic decision-making as informed by the discourses which one takes up, with this in turn dependent on the individual’s structural position. Consequently, it was necessary to gain access to both individual perspectives on their own decision-making, and to the larger scale discourses that influence these, for instance at an institutional level, in order to build up a comprehensive picture of the multiple facets of the decision-making process. Therefore on an

epistemological level, I considered that the use of multiple research methods was necessary in order to gain access to discourses which were occurring on these different levels: individual questionnaires and in-depth interviewing of the young women within the school enabled access to individual discourses relating to decision-making, whereas discourses occurring on the school level could be accessed through observation of events, reading and analysis of documents which had been produced (for instance) to market the school and interviews with school staff involved in the decision-making process. These various methods will be discussed in turn below.

Documents

Discourses are not merely conveyed through spoken language, but also through written text and images in the form of documents. Indeed, the collection and analysis of various documents provided another method of access to official discourses within the school relating to decision-making, gender and social class. My selection of materials included handouts and leaflets given out to students in Careers lessons (both those designed by the school and those from external sources), a school prospectus, and a booklet detailing AS and A2 Level options for those considering staying on or moving to the Sixth Form at Midham. I also looked at the school website as a key site for revealing the image that the school wished to portray to the public.

When working with documents in research, there are several pertinent points which it is important to bear in mind. Scott (1990) has highlighted that whilst there are general principles in documentary research

which similarly apply to other areas of research, such as considering the authenticity, credibility and representativeness of the account of the situation provided by a document, documents also have certain features which distinguish them from other kinds of source materials which may be used in research. By contrast to interview or questionnaire data, which participants know will be used for the purpose of a research study, authors of documents, on the whole, have not written them for this purpose. Consequently, Scott emphasises that it is necessary for the researcher to consider the authorship and origin of documents. Moreover, he considers that it is important for the researcher to note who the document was designed for and created by, who is able to access it, that is, whether it is a private or public document, and whether it was designed for publication and / or official usage. By elucidating what are the social processes behind the production of a document, this can enable the researcher to be better informed about the purpose and interpretation of the document itself.

Although the selection of what is included in documents is significant in terms of the impression that the authors wants to give to the reader (Gomm, 2004), it must be remembered that texts are socially situated in their production (Gee et al., 1992) and it is important to note the social context in which documentary materials were produced, and for what purpose (May, 1997; Punch, 2005). In a similar connection, Prior (2003) comments that when carrying out research using documents, the documents should be considered in relation to their fields, frames and networks of action, which requires a consideration of the creators of the document, its prospective users, and the setting in which the document is located and was

produced. Whilst not negating the importance of examining the content of the document, Prior highlights the significance of studying documents in relation to their social setting, with attention given to how the document was manufactured and its function, rather than solely looking at its contents.

This points towards the use of a form of documentary analysis which goes beyond quantitative content analysis techniques (such as Holsti, 1969; Neuendorf, 2002), which cast their primary focus on the content of the document, focussing on the enumeration of the usage of particular phrases and words, to a wider form of analysis which encompasses a more qualitatively-based consideration of the social setting and context in which the document was produced, as well as the content of the document itself. Accordingly, I bore this in mind when collecting and analysing documents during my research at Midham School. For each document, I made a careful note of when, where and in what context it was collected (for instance, was it collected in a lesson, in a more general talk for students and / or parents, or at a school Open Day?). I also noted down the intended audience and purpose of the document, namely, whether it was aimed at students, parents, school staff, the general public, or more than one of these groups. I further noted down who had produced the document, that is, whether it was an internal document produced within the school, and if so, by which member(s) of staff it was produced, or alternatively, if it was a general document produced by an outside agency (for instance, some of the

information given to students in Careers lessons was provided by the Local Education Authority or Connexions²²).

In relation to the content of the documents, a semiotic form of analysis was employed, looking at the content of each document in terms of the text and photographic / pictorial images used. A similar form of analysis was used by Copeland (2001) in his analysis of independent school prospectuses, and also by Ball and Gewirtz (1997) in their analysis of school marketing materials. By focussing on the symbols and signs conveyed by each document through its content in terms of text and pictures, and relating these to the key themes of my research (gender, social class and decision-making) it was possible to see how each document played an active role in structuring the setting within which it was located (Prior, 2003). This enabled a picture to be built up of how decision-making was portrayed within the school in an official sense through the use of particular documents, as well as the school's ideas regarding, for instance, suitable decisions and university/career destinations for middle class young women, rendering each document as an active and structuring factor within the particular context in which it was used within the school.

Observation

Observational research techniques enable one ‘to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in [a] setting’ (Emerson et al., 2001:352). In my time at Midham, I observed

²² Connexions is an organisation that provides one-to-one advice for young people between the ages of 13-19, supporting them in their transition to adulthood. Arising out of the former County Careers Service, beginning with a pilot stage in 2001, they now cover various issues including careers, education, health, housing and relationships.

fifteen Careers lessons, two Open Days (one for the whole school, one for the Sixth Form), one Careers talk with an outside speaker, and an A level Forum event for Upper Fifth (Year 11) students. This observation of lessons and institutional events served several important purposes. It enabled me to familiarise myself with the processes and events occurring within the school, and to discover key events which were worthy of further investigation either through additional observation or through more in-depth exploration in interviews with school staff and / or students. Further to this, through my observations and their subsequent analysis, I was able to build up a clear picture of how the decision-making process was handled on a school-wide, formal level, through events, talks and lessons designed to guide students (and in the case of some events, their parents) through the various decision-making processes. Moreover, this enabled access to official discourses conveyed within the school relating to decision-making. This contrasted with the decision-making processes of individual students, made on a more personal level, which my interviews and questionnaires allowed me access to, and which will be discussed in the following sections.

The taking of fieldnotes was crucial to my observational research, and I generated a large amount of notes during my time at Midham, eventually filling five notebooks with handwritten notes and producing over 100 pages of typed notes. The handwritten and typed notes differed significantly in style and content, and consequently it is pertinent here to explore the different types of fieldnotes which one takes, and how this relates to the finished research study, as has been discussed by various authors in this field (Clifford, 1990; Lederman, 1990; Sanjek, 1990 a and b;

Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Emerson et al., 2001). For instance, Sanjek (1990b) notes the difference between ‘scratch notes’, which are scribbled down quickly whilst in the field or immediately after leaving, and more detailed, descriptive, second-stage field notes, written after leaving the field. Similarly, Clifford (1990) describes three different types of fieldnotes: (1) inscription, where a short mnemonic word or phrase is jotted down in order to remind the researcher of an occurrence, to be written up at a later date; (2) transcription, where the researcher asks a question or for an explanation of something, and writes the answer down; and (3) description, the making of a longer and more coherent representation of an observed cultural reality. He emphasises that descriptive notes tend to still be quite thick and rough, but that they can be used as a base for later writing. In a similar connection, Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe a process where the researcher moves from making mental notes of significant occurrences, to quickly jotted notes, and finally to more detailed written notes, which are then used as the basis for the written research study. In relation to her own fieldnotes, Lederman (1990) similarly describes how she made different types of notes, ranging from short and fragmentary notes and daily logs of occurrences, to longer descriptions.

Further to this, in some cases, it is possible and felt by the researcher to be appropriate to make fieldnotes whilst in the research setting, whereas in other cases, this is felt by the researcher to be impossible or inappropriate (Emerson et al., 2001). Indeed, in the majority of cases when I was observing lessons or events at Midham, I felt that it would be inappropriate to be making notes. For instance, Careers lessons often involved informal

discussion between Kathryn Williams and the students, and I felt that had I been writing things down in a notebook whilst these discussions were occurring, I may have made them feel uncomfortable or hindered the freedom of the discussion. For this reason, I made mental notes (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) of significant events and occurrences during these lessons, and wrote these down in detail later. Consequently, I seldom made notes whilst actually in the school, except on the rare occasions that I was in the staffroom, careers room or a classroom alone. On these occasions, I would sometimes take out my notebook and make short notes on occurrences and issues which I perceived to be significant, to be expanded upon later: similar to the process of ‘inscription’ described by Clifford (1990). However, more commonly, I tended to employ a strategy which Emerson et al. (2001) have suggested is common amongst ethnographers, which is to avoid writing fieldnotes in the presence of those being observed, but rather, on leaving the setting, to immediately pull out a notebook in order to jot down reminders of key words or incidents. Accordingly, many of the initial brief jottings in my notebooks were made either on the bus on my way home, whilst waiting in the bus shelter, or sitting in a café located near to the school. These were expanded into longer, typed fieldnotes (more akin to Clifford’s ‘descriptive’ notes) when I got home. I ensured that I did this in the evenings after I had finished my research, in order to ensure that they did not go ‘cold’ (Sanjek, 1990b), that is, that I remembered what had happened and could make sense of my brief, handwritten notes.

When writing up my handwritten notes into a longer and more descriptive format, I tended to follow a specific form, following Schatzman

and Strauss (1973) and Burgess (1991). These authors suggest the use of a system whereby the notes are divided into observational, theoretical and methodological notes. Consequently, when typing up my notes, I would start with a thorough description of everything that had happened in the school that day. I would follow this up by considering how these happenings related to theoretical concepts and to the literature available in this area, and by noting down any relevant factors relating to my methodological approach. Such an approach has been proposed by Burgess (1991) to inform different types and levels of analysis, and similarly, Blaxter et al. (2001) suggest that dividing research notes into sections prompts reflection on differing aspects of the research, and the researcher's own role in the construction of knowledge. For myself, I found that this process of structured note-making provided a useful early stage of analysis of my data, providing interesting and reflective insights on my thoughts at the time of carrying out the research, which in turn informed my later analysis.

As well as being informative in and of themselves, my observations and their subsequent analysis led me to discover several significant areas which could be further investigated though techniques which focussed more on the decision-making processes of individuals, that is, questionnaires and interviews. These will be discussed further below.

Questionnaires

Oppenheim (2000) identifies several steps in the construction of a questionnaire survey. Firstly, the aims of the study are to be decided, with

consideration of the theories that are to be investigated. Next, the relevant literature should be reviewed, leading to the development of early conceptualisation of the study, and consideration of how the study itself will be designed. The hypotheses for the study must then be developed, and this has considerable influence on the design of the questionnaire itself. Pilot work should be carried out next, before the final group to be studied is identified and the questionnaire carried out. Finally, the data should be processed and analysed.

I went through all of these phases during the instigation of my survey questionnaires at Midham, and these will be considered in turn in this section. With regards to the aims of my study, I used student questionnaires in my research at Midham for two reasons. Firstly, questionnaires were a method by which I could obtain certain information in a standardised form from all members of the Sixth Form: for instance, basic information about the educational backgrounds of their families, and about their own educational decision-making and intentions. This enabled broad and general observations which were easily quantifiable and comparable (Denscombe, 2003) to be made about the school population, such as the percentage of students who wished to go to university, and the percentage who had family experience of Higher Education. Secondly, some of the information gathered from the questionnaire formed a useful preparatory study to my later, more in-depth interviews (Simmons, 2001; Punch, 2005), by highlighting some key areas and themes which could be investigated further and built upon in this later research. This included areas such as the take-up and use of particular resources and facilities in the school, the wider

community and the home to aid them in their decision-making about their educational pathways: findings arising from the student questionnaire responses on these issues was investigated further in my interviews. The topics on which the questionnaire was to focus were informed by my prior reading in the key areas of decision-making, gender and social class, as detailed in Chapter 1.

The dual purpose of the questionnaire led to particular decisions being made with respect to the design of the study, and necessitated the use of questions of different types, both closed and open. Closed questions, where the respondent has to make a choice between a fixed number of possible answers (Simmons, 2001), were used at the beginning of the questionnaire in order to find out basic information about the student's family educational background, how long she had attended the school and who had made the decision for her to go there. In later sections of the questionnaire, 5 point Likert scales (May, 1995; Oppenheim, 2000) were used in order to gauge students' attitudes and opinions on various subjects, such as the influence which various factors (school, family, friends) had had on their decision-making, and the usefulness of various school events to their decision-making processes. Further to this, open-ended questions were also used, in order that students had the opportunity to elaborate on the answers which they had given to the closed questions. For instance, after a Likert scale question on the influence of various people on their decision-making processes when choosing their AS and A2 level subjects (question 11a), students were asked to briefly elaborate on which of these people had been most influential and why (question 11b). This enabled deeper insight

to be gained into students' answers, and also served as a basis for further exploration in in-depth interviews.

Additionally, the use of open-ended questions in some cases raised new issues. For instance, question 19a was a Likert scale question asking about the influence of various people on students' decisions about education, training or careers at the age of eighteen-plus, and this was followed by 19b, an open ended question asking students to describe who had been most influential in this decision, and why. However, several respondents wrote that they felt that they themselves had been the most influential person in this decision. Although they acknowledged drawing on help from other sources, student responses were often insistent that it was their choice alone, with for instance one student writing 'I can make my own decisions'. This led me to believe that I must be careful not to make assumptions about this area, and that whilst the idea of influence from these sources should not be negated, it was more subtle than expected. This informed the basis for further questioning of students about this area in my in-depth interviews, and in turn, led to the development of my assertions regarding the young women's' decision-making becoming more agentic over time (as described in more detail in chapter 3).

When carrying out a questionnaire, it is important to carry out a pilot study with a small sample of people drawn from a similar target population (Simmons, 2001). I therefore decided to initially trial my questionnaire with a small group of 20 Sixth Form students from Padley High, a co-educational independent school which I contacted at the outset of my research, and which, as has previously been discussed, I utilised as a pilot study. This

enabled me to check whether the questions were appropriate, could be understood by students of a similar age group and educational background, and to ascertain whether they needed to be altered in any way. The questionnaire was accessible to and understood by the majority of the students at the pilot school, but some encountered problems with the signposting of certain questions (such as the Likert scales). Consequently, and in the knowledge that clarity of questions is necessary to ensure a good response rate and that respondents understand what is expected of them (Simmons, 2001; Denscombe, 2003), I revised the questions slightly, ensuring that these were clearer and included more explanation about how to answer in the final version of the questionnaire. Furthermore, piloting of the questionnaire identified a need to have different versions of the questionnaire for the two year groups, as while students from the Upper Sixth had on the whole already applied to university, students from the Lower Sixth had only recently begun to make decisions about this, and therefore found it difficult to answer questions about, for instance, which university and course they wished to progress on to. I therefore decided to make slightly different versions of the questionnaire, with the Upper Sixth version of the questionnaire having a section where they could write which universities and courses they had applied to, and the Lower Sixth version having instead a section where students could write which universities, colleges or occupational areas they were considering.²³

The questionnaire was completed by Sixth Form students at Midham School during Careers lessons in December 2004. I asked Kathryn

²³ A copy of the questionnaires for Upper Sixth students can be found at Appendix 2, and Lower Sixth students at Appendix 3.

Williams' permission for this, and she allocated ten minutes at the end of one of each group's Careers lessons to this activity. Consequently, I attended these sessions as usual to observe, but towards the end of the sessions, I gave a short talk, reminding students of the purpose of my research, and handed out the questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed under classroom conditions, supervised by both myself and Kathryn, which was vital in ensuring the high response rate. In total, 62 out of the 80 Sixth Form students (77.5%) completed a questionnaire, with missing responses representing those students who were on a school trip, University Open Day visit or absent through illness on the days when the questionnaires were handed out.

I took along a large envelope to sessions where the questionnaires were being handed out, and allowed students to submit them anonymously, without either myself or Kathryn seeing their responses in the first instance. This was essential, as several of the questions related to the school's Careers provision, advice and guidance, and if the young women thought that their answers were likely to be read and identified by the Careers teacher, they may not have given truthful answers. As it was, the wide variety of responses, positive, negative and neutral, would appear to indicate that this concession to anonymity was successful.

Finally, analysis of the questionnaires was carried out. Responses to the closed questions were input and analysed using SPSS (Version 12). The open question responses were analysed manually, with key themes identified for further exploration in the in-depth interviews with students.

Interviewing

Whilst qualitative interviews have their base in conversation (Kvale, 1996), these are directed conversations (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) which hold the specific purpose of eliciting material on a particular theme. Furthermore, the decision to use interviews tends to have at its root an epistemological perspective based around ideas of constructionism, with interview respondents constructing the meanings of their own lives and experiences through their dialogue with the interviewer (Warren, 2001). In this way, the realities experienced by respondents are foregrounded (Spencer, 2001). Moreover, this is broadly representative of an epistemological shift in education research in general, whereby students' own definitions and constructions of the reality they experience have gained increasing precedence (Tierney and Dilley, 2001).

In my research study at Midham School, in-depth semi-structured interviewing was employed as a technique with school staff and students in order to elicit a more detailed picture of how they constructed discourses around decision-making within the school for themselves. Interviews with four of the key members of staff who were involved in the young women's decision-making processes were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and these generally lasted between thirty minutes and an hour. Prior to conducting my interviews with staff at Midham, I piloted my interview schedules at Padley High, revising and adapting certain questions in the light of this. For instance, I carried out a pilot interview with the Careers teacher at Padley High, and she expressed surprise that my initial questions focussed only on decision-making in the upper years of the school, as she believed that these

issues were pertinent (and were covered in Careers lessons) throughout the school. Consequently, when I came to interview Kathryn Williams at Midham about similar matters, I ensured that my questioning included reference to the Careers lessons given throughout the school, rather than just those for older students as in my initial interview schedule.

My interviews with staff at Midham took place at the beginning of my time at the school, in October 2004. A table listing those interviewed is available as Appendix 4. These interviews covered various areas, including the teacher's own role in the decision-making process, the advice and guidance that they gave to students when it came to making decisions about their education, training and / or career, and the marketing of the school. Different aspects were focussed upon in each interview depending on the teacher's role.²⁴

Further to this, interviews were carried out with 23 out of the 80 Sixth Form students from Midham, on the whole in groups of two or three.²⁵ I had asked students for expressions of interest in taking part in my research interviews back in October, and I renewed this call when I was giving out my questionnaires. These interviews took place during the month of February 2005. This was a relatively quiet month for the students as they had recently finished their internal school 'mock' examinations, and those in the Upper Sixth who were applying to university had already submitted their UCAS (University and College Admissions Service) forms during the Autumn term and were waiting for responses from universities. Kathryn

²⁴ A copy of the interview schedule which I used in my staff interviews is available as Appendix 5.

²⁵ The only student not interviewed in a group was Nicole, who was not available at the same time as any of her friends, so volunteered to be interviewed alone.

Williams suggested that carrying out my interviews at this time would cause minimal disruption to the school's schedule.

My epistemological perspective led me to focus on the perspectives and discourses of the young women themselves by foregrounding their own experiences rather than relying on the accounts of adults to construct these (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 1999; Tierney and Dilley, 2001), and this was key to my decision to carry out in-depth interviews with the young women themselves. This epistemological position will be discussed further in the later section on 'Giving Voice'.

The majority of the young women volunteered to be interviewed in friendship groups of two or three, and I allocated the small number of students who volunteered alone into groups with other students in the same year group who had the same free lessons.²⁶ The idea of interviewing young people in small groups rather than alone is recommended by Eder and Fingerson (2001), who note that young people become more relaxed in interview situations when they are in the company of their peers. Moreover, these authors suggest that in group interviews, young people construct their meanings collectively with their peers, as group interview situations allow them to build on one another's talk and to discuss a wide range of feelings and opinions. Further to this, young people being interviewed in peer groups have to justify and defend their answers to their peers, some of whom they will interact with every day, and Eder and Fingerson believe that this leads to more accurate accounts being given. Indeed, I found that interviewing students who were friends together was a useful strategy, as

²⁶ A list of the interview participants, and the dates of interviews, can be seen at Appendix 6.

they often had shared experiences, and were often able to help each other by recalling events in the other's life. Moreover, interviewing students in friendship groups meant that the groups already had rapport and were comfortable in discussion together, which in turn helped my own establishment of a relationship with the students (Wallace *et al.*, 1998).

This meant that responses generated were more natural.

However, when students were interviewed in groups with those who were not close friends, this was often more challenging, as they tended to have less in common and consequently, tended to speak less about their own experiences. For instance, I interviewed Rebecca, Lucy and Beth from the Lower Sixth together as they studied similar options and had similar free lessons. However, the interview was challenging, as Beth was very confident and talkative, and had already started making decisions about going to university, whereas both Lucy and Rebecca were extremely quiet and had not considered their post-eighteen options yet. Consequently, I had to constantly ensure that I was including all three young women in the interview.

I used a semi-structured interviewing technique when interviewing the young women. Semi-structured techniques allow flexibility, enabling new topics to be introduced and areas to be explored as a result of what the interviewee says. Johnson and Weller (2001) suggest beginning interviews with broad and descriptive questions on general topics, before moving towards more highly focussed questions which enable more detailed and specific information to be elicited. Consequently, I developed a list of key areas which I wished to discuss with them: these included the decision by

their parents and / or themselves that they would be educated at Midham in the first instance, options which they had considered at post-16 and post-18 level, and future career plans. I formulated broad and descriptive initial areas for discussion, which I used as a guide to the main areas I wanted to cover in my interviews. After asking an initial question based on these broad discussion areas, I then moved to more focussed questions in order to gain a more detailed perspective, often asking the young women to elaborate on particular key points of interest, or to explain the more general points that they had made. On my interview schedules, I wrote down various questions which I could use as prompts, in order to elicit more information about specific areas.²⁷ Further to this, the semi-structured schedules allowed my interview questions to evolve over time, with the flexibility to add in new questions on areas which several students raised, or to alter the wording of questions which they found difficult to understand. For instance, I asked some of the young women about the ethos of the school, but found that on several occasions, they asked me to define the word “ethos” as they were not familiar with it. Consequently, in later interviews, I asked questions instead about the “atmosphere” or “feel” of the school.

The student interviews were all tape recorded, and fully transcribed using a word processing package. Whilst some researchers have not considered it necessary to transcribe the whole interview (Walford, 2001), and others have highlighted potential problems with the quality of transcription of audio tapes (Poland, 2001) I considered that listening to and

²⁷ My interview schedules for student interviews can be seen at Appendix 7.

transcribing the tapes was extremely useful as a way of familiarising myself with the data, and whilst transcribing, I also made some early analytical notes.

The interview data was analysed using a technique based on grounded theory (see, for example, Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001; Charmaz, 2001, 2006). Whilst grounded theory has many variants, from Strauss and Corbin's (1998) more positivistic version of the approach, to Charmaz and Mitchell's (2001) more ethnographic version, all hold particular characteristics in common, offering a set of useful heuristic guidelines for carrying out research rather than strict and formulaic rules (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003). That is, all derivations of grounded theory hold that it involves the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, and the pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001; Charmaz, 2006). When early data has been collected, this is separated, sorted and synthesised through qualitative coding of each segment of data, with the code attached to the data describing what each segment is about (Charmaz, 2006). This can then be compared with other segments of data as they are collected. Finally, this comparison and analysis of codes is eventually built into theoretical concepts (Denscombe, 2003): 'data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct' (Charmaz, 2006: 2).

The manual data coding matrix which I adopted when analysing the data from my interviews (90 pages of typed transcripts from the interviews with students, 26 pages from my interviews with members of school staff),

was based around grounded theory techniques. Firstly, I read through each transcribed interview, noting down what each section was about using a manual coding technique. Charmaz (2001) refers to this as ‘open’ or ‘initial’ coding, where the researcher begins to make analytical decisions about the data. I soon began to come up with certain similar themes: for instance, the changes in decision-making processes and responsibilities as the young women grew older; parental influence on decision-making; perspectives on Careers lessons. This process of using recurrent themes to synthesise and conceptualise the data is referred to by Charmaz (2001) as ‘selective’ or ‘focussed’ coding.

Following this, I then developed a matrix, which had all of the students’ names on the horizontal axis, and all of the codes which I had developed for the themes on the vertical axis. Whenever an instance of a student talking about a particular theme arose in the transcript, I noted down the page number on which this occurred in the transcript in the box which corresponded between her name and the code. Thus it could be seen which the common themes were by glancing at the matrix and seeing which codes had several instances noted. If a new theme emerged in later notes, this was added onto the bottom of the matrix, and transcripts which had been analysed earlier were re-read in the light of this emergent theme. Similarly, sometimes a theme was eventually divided: for instance, the theme of parental influence on decision-making was eventually divided to encompass the differences between those parents of students from established middle class backgrounds, whose influence was more implicit, and those parents in families where their connection to the middle class was newer and less

secure, where there was often more explicit encouragement to go to university and to choose particular courses (see chapters 5 and 6 for further discussion of these emerging themes). The emergence of key themes in this way led to the development of the theoretical categories of my analysis, which, when combined with my data gathered from the other sources (documents, observations and questionnaires) and my reading and analysis of the literature in this area, led to the development of the topics for my substantive research-based chapters.

Giving Voice: Foregrounding of Participant Accounts

Previously available studies of choice in the independent sector of education have tended to focus on parents, and their decision to use independent-sector education for their children (Fox; 1985; Johnson, 1987; Jordan *et al.*, 1994).²⁸ Studies of post-16 education in the maintained and vocational sectors (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) have shown young people of this age as actors who are able to make their own, largely autonomous decisions about education and future careers. By contrast, in the small number of studies that allude to those from independent schools, parents are considered to play a dominant role in their offspring's educational choice at Sixth Form and university level (Allatt, 1993; Reay *et al.*, 2005).

The question must be raised here of whose reality is being represented in the writing up of ethnographic fieldwork: are we being

²⁸ I carried out a similar small scale study myself at MA level, involving interviews with 12 parents about their choice to send their children to an independent junior school (see Marson, 2002).

presented with the meaning that the person who is being researched perceives an event or occurrence to have, or rather, is it the interpretation of the researcher? (Spencer, 2001). It is necessary to ensure that the voices of participants in the setting are listened to and that they are able to give their interpretation of what is happening, and this is particularly the case with children and young people, whose opinions and interpretations have until recently been disregarded in favour of adults' interpretations of events (Tierney and Dilley, 2001). Whilst over time, there has been recognition that (particularly male) adults have subjective agency and the possibility of self-determination, the recognition of the availability of an agentic position to children is relatively new (Hughes, 2004). This has been considered by Tierney and Dilley (2001) to be representative of an epistemological shift within the field of education, whereby the ordinary voices of participants in the learning process (including children and young people) are now listened to and perceived to be significant in the construction of their own realities.

Indeed, in recent years there has been an increase in research which gives young people voice, and recognises them as 'competent and reliable witnesses to their own lives' (France, 2004: 177), laying emphasis on their words and interpretations of situations rather than just those of their parents or teachers. This is grounded in the researcher's epistemology, that is, her beliefs about how we can discover the nature of reality. In this way, I agree with Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (1999:61), who point out that:

The reality experienced by children and young people in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by

inference and assumption. The meanings that they attach to their experiences are not necessarily the ones that their parents and teachers would ascribe...

Similarly, Rudduck and Flutter (2000: 82) have also discussed the importance of including young people in research relating to their education, suggesting that it is necessary to involve them as active participants in research, drawing on their ‘rich but often untapped understanding of processes and events’. They call for research to draw on ‘pupil participation and perspective’, which they feel suggests a stronger input by pupils themselves, with adults listening to them and taking what they say seriously. This active involvement of young people enables their voices to be heard, and this contrasts to their former exclusion from research, which the authors consider is based on an outmoded perspective of childhood ‘which fails to acknowledge children’s capacity to reflect on their own lives’ (*ibid*: 86). Likewise, Renold (2002: 30), carrying out research with primary school children, approached her research from a ‘children’s standpoint’, aiming to give voice to children’s own experiences as they constructed them themselves, and recognising them as playing an active role in the construction and mediation of their own lives.

In my research at Midham School, I aimed to focus on the young women’s own personal accounts of the decision-making process, and how they constructed themselves discursively as decision-making individuals. By placing the young women themselves, and their own accounts, at the centre of my research, and seeing these as legitimate and authentic accounts

of the process through these young people's eyes, it was possible to see how they constructed the decision-making process for themselves, and what influences they themselves drew on.

However, research with young people raises various ethical issues, which are highly significant and pertinent for consideration here. These are considered in the following section.

Ethics

The consideration of ethical issues had significant bearing on my work at Midham School. The collection of research data inevitably raises issues relating to the way in which organisations and individuals involved in the research are treated by the researcher (Oliver, 2003). Furthermore, whilst ethical issues are indeed pertinent in all social research, carrying out research with young people highlights particular concerns surrounding the choice of appropriate and ethical methodology (Lewis, 2004). All of these issues will be the subject of the current section.

Thus, the question is raised of how to ensure that research is ethical. Guidelines for ethical practice aimed at those conducting research have been developed by various professional bodies involved in social and educational research, such as the British Sociological Association, (BSA, 2002); British Educational Research Association, (BERA, 2004); and the Economic and Social Research Council, (ESRC, 2006). The ESRC guidelines (2006: 1), for example, state that research 'should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality'. Both researchers and subjects involved in the research should be informed about its purpose, methods and

possible uses. Respect must be given to issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and harm to research participants must be avoided. Furthermore, the guidelines state that the independence of research must be clear, with any potential bias or conflicts of interest made explicit.

However, problems have been identified with professional ethical codes such as these. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) have highlighted that as they are not method-sensitive, they can have an unnecessary and inappropriate constraining effect on the research. Furthermore, these authors have highlighted that by following such codes ritualistically, researchers may become less sensitive to the specific issues arising from the particular method they use. They advocate instead the adoption of an ethical perspective which draws on the work of Beauchamp *et al.* (1982), and is based around the principles of non-maleficence (participants should not be harmed), beneficence (research should produce positive and identifiable benefits), autonomy and self-determination (respect for the values and decisions of participants) and justice (people who are equal in relevant respects should be treated equally). Moreover, they assert that rather than adherence to a specific ethical code, one should be reflective in relation to one's research practice. This is a point with which I agree: whilst ethical guidelines may provide a useful starting-point, it is important to be reflective about how one carries out one's own research, and consider this in relation to the potential consequences for respondents. I aim to do this in the current section.

The issue of gaining informed consent from respondents with respect to taking part in the research is a fundamental ethical matter which is

essential to consider (Burns, 2000; Silverman, 2006). At the outset of the research, potential respondents should have the purpose of the research explained to them, the role which they could take within this, and the intended future dissemination of any data in published reports or research theses (Oliver, 2003). However, when carrying out research in a school setting, access to the setting itself is generally granted by the Head, and others in that field have relatively little control over this (Burgess, 1991). Indeed, as has already been mentioned in the previous section on Access, my access to Midham School was granted by the Head, Sheila Holmes-Brown, although my initial access negotiations did also involve the careers teacher, Kathryn Williams. I feel that if Kathryn has been uncomfortable or not wanted to take part in my research, the Head would not have granted me access to the school. However, the vast majority of the teachers, and all of the students, had no say in relation to my initial access to the school, only finding out about my research after the initial access had been granted. I therefore tried to redress this by ensuring that all of those who participated in my research (both teachers and students) had the opportunity to give their informed consent to take part, or if they wanted to, to withdraw from the research. With regards to the young women at Midham, I followed Oliver's (2003:15) advice that 'Participants should be fully informed about all relevant aspects of the research, before they agree to take part'. Thus I ensured that they knew about my research from the outset by giving a short presentation about the purpose of my research, and their potential involvement with it. I informed them of the confidentiality of anything which they discussed with me, and that all names of students and of the

school would be changed in the write-up of my research. Furthermore, similarly to Pugsley (2004), who carried out research on young people's university choices, I told participants of the purpose of my research, and that it was not directly connected to the school, or to university applications or admissions. I assured the young women that they would not be penalised if they did not wish to respond or participate in my research, but that their participation would be extremely helpful to me.

At this time, I also gave out forms, on which the young women could note down their name, class (for purposes of contacting them with regards to interview times), and the names of any friends with whom they would like to participate in a group interview. These forms were to be returned during the following fortnight, to a large folder which I left in the Sixth Form Tutors' room. Further to this, when I gave out my questionnaires, I again invited respondents to tell me their details if they were willing to partake in a further interview. By recruiting respondents in this way, I enabled them to self-select for participation.

As I allowed them two weeks between my initial talk and the date on which I required forms to be submitted, I gave them time to consider whether they wanted to be involved. I also gave out letters to all students regarding my research, for them to give to their parents, which may have also led to discussion between parents and their daughters regarding participation in research.²⁹ In this letter, I invited parents or their daughters to get in touch with me if they had any problems or queries regarding my research. No-one took up this offer.

²⁹ The letter is reproduced as Appendix 8.

However, I did not specifically seek permission from parents for their daughters to take part in my research. Whilst permission has traditionally been sought from the parents of respondents who are under eighteen years of age, this is inherently problematic, as control of the research process is being handed over to someone other than the respondent, and this denies young people the right to make decisions about their own involvement in studies (France, 2004). As my respondents were all aged between sixteen and eighteen years old, I considered them to be mature enough to make decisions for themselves regarding participating in research. From a legal perspective, if a child is mature and able to understand, s/he has the capacity to make decisions about participating in research (Masson, 1999). Furthermore, legislation on young people's rights tends to emphasise the possibility of a young person making decisions about his / her own life: for instance, France (2004) refers to young people's rights to make decisions relating to their sexual health so long as they are deemed 'mature' enough. Consequently, whilst I felt that it was necessary to make parents aware of the research in which their daughters may be partaking, I thought that the final decision should be made by the young women themselves.

Similarly, with regards to the teachers who were involved in my research, I ensured that they were well-informed about my research, their prospective role in it, and its expected outcomes and dissemination: additionally making them aware that they could pull out, or refuse to answer questions on a particular topic, should they wish to. When I attended lessons, presentations or talks, I ensured that I had permission from the

teacher beforehand to attend and observe, clarifying with them the purpose of my research. Furthermore, in the cases where I conducted more formal semi-structured interviews with teachers, following Oliver (2003) I sought permission from the teacher to tape-record the interview, emphasising that the recordings would only be listened to by me, and that any transcripts would be anonymised by the use of pseudonyms.

Indeed, matters of confidentiality were crucial to my research. When gaining initial access to the school, I assured Sheila Holmes-Brown of the confidentiality of my research, and that I would neither include the real name of the school or any of the teachers or students in any dissemination of my research, nor would I tell anyone from any other school that I was researching there. The latter was particularly significant as at the time I was having discussions with several independent schools in the area, which, in the marketised field of independent schools (Gorard, 1997) were in competition with each other for the same students. Aside from confidentiality allowing them to more freely express their views, I did not wish to seem to be ‘spying’ on the school on the behalf of any of its ‘rivals’.

Accordingly, confidentiality was also afforded to all of the young women who took part in my research. I raised this issue when I initially told them about my research, and repeated it when I handed out the questionnaires. As mentioned previously, when the young women completed my questionnaires, they did not have to put their names on them, and after they had completed them, I asked that they place them in a large envelope at the front of the classroom, rather than handing them directly to me or to their teacher. I also clarified issues of confidentiality before each

interview, telling them that their names and the name of the school would be changed when I wrote up the research. In the main, students did not appear to be worried about issues of confidentiality, but this did come up as an issue particularly in cases where the young women in question wanted to express views that criticised the school or some aspect of it. For instance, during my interview with Gemma and Louise, two friends from the Lower Sixth, they expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of the school's teaching, lessons and provision. However, as the interview drew to a close, they became slightly concerned about whether what they said would be shown to any of their teachers, particularly those whom they had been critical of, with Louise asking 'This doesn't get shown to anyone, no?' . I reassured them of the confidentiality of what they had said, repeating the purpose of my research and that it was not directly connected to the school or any members of staff.

Moreover, for confidentiality reasons I made the decision not to include pictures from the school website or prospectus in the write-up of this study. Whilst these have formed a significant part of my analysis, the possibility of identifying the school itself from photographs of the school buildings or of pupil uniforms, or of identifying individual pupils and teachers from particular photographs, rendered this ethically problematic. Consequently, I have provided descriptions of the photographic images which appear in the prospectus and on the website, but have not included the images themselves.

However, although researchers may aim for confidentiality, it is very difficult to assure that research data are entirely unattributable, particularly

by those who are themselves involved in the setting (Burgess, 1985; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). For instance, Burgess (1985) found that when his research was disseminated, the teachers involved could be identified by themselves and others within the school, particularly as his work was focussed within one small department. Similarly, with my research at Midham, there was only one Careers teacher, Head, Marketing Co-ordinator *etc*, so these members of staff would be able to be easily identified by anyone within the school, although as they and the school have been given pseudonyms, they would hopefully not be recognised to anyone outside the immediate context of the school. Furthermore, whilst all of the young women who took part in the research were given pseudonyms, they may be identifiable to teachers within the school from their subject and Higher Education institutional choices. Removing this information from the write-up of the study would have removed substantial significant information in relation to the young women's decision-making in relation to subject and institution, which were highly significant to my results, so I decided to leave these in. As a consequence of this, consideration had to be made of the implications of participation in research, particularly if those who have participated can potentially be personally identified. Indeed, in relation to research in educational institutions, Walford (2001) has noted that when sharing the results of research with an institution, it is important to ensure that the Head will not penalise those involved for the opinions that they have expressed. In the case of my study, the young women were more concerned about this than the teachers, who tended to discuss more uncontroversial facts, rather than opinions, in my interviews with them.

Consequently, I took the decision not to send the school any of the results of my qualitative data until all of the students whom I interviewed would have left the school (those who were in the Lower Sixth at the time of my study would have left the school in July 2006), although I did send them some anonymised quantitative data in the summer of 2006.

A further crucial ethical matter to take into account when carrying out research in a school setting and focussing on young people is that of ‘protection from harm’ (France, 2004: 179). As my research necessarily involved interviewing students in small groups without the presence of a teacher, it was necessary for me to have a Criminal Records Bureau Check, as is specified in the Police Act 1997 Part V, and the Protection of Children Act 1999. These checks are necessary for anyone who wishes to work with children or young people under the age of eighteen, and check for previous criminal offences, particularly those involving children. I was happy to have this check done, as it provided an additional form of assurance of my legitimacy and good intentions to the school, which was of benefit when gaining initial access, and furthering my access once I had begun my early research at the school.

Conclusion

For ethnographers, the ontological and epistemological foundations of their work are inherently associated with ethical issues, with the assumptions which one makes about the nature of reality having significant implications for the judgements which one makes in relation to one’s ethical

responsibilities in relation to the researched (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001).

This in turn relates to the decisions which one makes about the methods which are used when carrying out a piece of research. Similarly, the accurate representation of the realities experienced by those in the setting, and a reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's own background, embodiment, and the limitations that this affords to the research, are highly significant (Spencer, 2001).

In this chapter, I have drawn on such ideas by providing a detailed description and justification of the methods used when carrying out my research at Midham School. The school itself was introduced, followed by discussion of how I used multiple methods to gain access to the discourses occurring within the school. Each of these methods enabled a fuller picture to be developed of the school and the experiences and processes occurring there, especially as these related to decision-making both within and outside the school by and for those who attended. Further, reflection on my own personal characteristics and background enabled consideration to be made of the possible limitations and biases which may ensue. Thus, the context for the data that is to be presented in the following chapters is revealed. It is to presenting more detailed analysis of the data collected at Midham School that I turn in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Becoming a Middle Class Chooser: Negotiating Subjective Agency and Structural Constraint in Educational Decision-Making

Introduction

The concomitant rise of theses of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005) and of neo-liberalism and free markets in education (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993; Chubb and Moe, 1997) has led to an increased focus on individual choices relating to education, training and careers, and how these are made. Studies have shown that middle class parents are more likely to be able to negotiate these decision-making processes successfully, thus securing a place at a good school for their offspring (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1997; Reay, 1998a). This has been seen to lead to sustained success and advantage for these young people, in particular those who attend independent schools (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Power *et al.*, 2005).

Yet whilst marketisation in the maintained sector of education is a relatively recent phenomenon, independent schools exist in a long-established market, competing against each other and against the maintained sector for students (Gorard, 1996, 1997; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Unlike the quasi-market of state-maintained education, (so-called because no money exchanges hands), the independent sector is a pure market, since as students (or in fact, their parents) pay for their education, the schools which are more successful at recruiting students accrue greater financial rewards (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Decisions made by parents

and young people relating to going to a particular school in the first place, and whether to stay on or leave at various ‘branching points’ (Hatcher, 1998) all occur within this marketised situation.

In this chapter, the processes of educational decision-making themselves are considered. First, theories relating to how these decisions are made will be outlined. Next, I draw on data collected from Midham, including interviews with staff and students, questionnaires and materials produced by the school (such as prospectuses) in order to present how the young women constructed themselves and were constructed as choosers, moving from childhood dependence to agentic young personhood. This leads into a discussion of how the young women were not just taught how to make decisions, but how to make the ‘right’ decisions, with this learning as intrinsically classed and gendered. Consideration will be made of the Careers literature available to these young women, and how choice was presented as ideally following a process of structured reasoning. Finally, some vignettes of decision-making processes are presented whereby students’ decisions are shown to be the outcome of a process of reasoning, but one that is delimited by structural factors such as class, gender, age and ability.

Integral to neo-liberalism, which underpins much of policy-making today, are notions of individualism, with individual choice-making processes underpinned by concepts of economic rationalism (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Nairn and Higgins, 2007; Davies and Bansel, 2007). Human choice-making behaviour is considered to be possible to understand and analyse using an ‘economic’ approach (Becker, 1977, 1991, 1996),

based on principles of utility maximisation or ‘optimisation’ (Coleman and Fararo, 1992). Individuals are assumed to possess a set of preferences which are stable, and to have the ability to rationally calculate how these can be achieved. The option will be taken from which the individual can accrue the greatest possible benefit, with choices being reached by a process of evaluation, consideration and elimination of unsuitable options, finally arriving at the option that will provide the individual with the greatest utility. Utility can be measured in terms of monetary and material goods, but also other factors such as time (Becker, 1991). This thesis of choice-making is known as Rational Choice Theory (RCT).

However, there have been many criticisms of RCT. Despite the fact that it has been argued that class is no longer significant, a ‘zombie’ category (Beck, 1992), this has been countered by arguments that structural and cultural properties have continued relevance and should not be reduced away (Archer and Tritter, 2000). Theories of rational, individualised choice have been further criticised in relation to their lack of consideration of emotive factors, family or friendship ties (Archer, 2000), and their presentation of the chooser analysing facts in a detached and emotionless manner (Hughes, 2002a). Contradictions have been highlighted between government ideas of rationality within a neo-liberal model in relation to choice in education, and how students actually make their choices (Baldwin and James, 2000).

Further alternatives and extensions of the theory have also been offered, which draw on structural factors such as social class rather than considering choice purely from an individualistic viewpoint. Theoretical

viewpoints based around Rational Choice within specific, class-based cultural frameworks have been used to analyse choices made in education, for instance by middle class parents choosing independent schools for their children (Jordan, Redley and James, 1994; Gorard, 1997), and by young people from different class backgrounds choosing Higher Education courses and institutions (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Rochat and Demeulemeester, 2001). In this vein, Goldthorpe (1996; 1998) proposed a sociological version of RCT, known as Rational Action Theory, which moves the decision about what is rational into the hands of the actor. For Goldthorpe (1996, 1998) actors are seen as assessing the costs and benefits before taking an action towards a goal that is conditioned by the opportunities, resources and constraints of the class system. Both Gambetta (1987) and Hatcher (1998) have similarly added structural factors to Rational Choice Theory, with Gambetta considering the extent to which school leavers ‘jump’, making rational and agentic decisions, and alternatively the extent to which they are ‘pushed’ by structural and cultural factors. Adapting the theory further, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) have put forward a notion of pragmatic rationality, where decision-making in relation to careers is seen as more practical than systematic, based on known information that is necessarily partial.

Rational Choice Theory has, however, been criticised on structural, class-based grounds. For instance, Savage (2003) sees Rational Choice Theory as the exemplification and normalisation of the middle class standpoint, without explicit acknowledgement being made of this. He considers it necessary to further examine the middle classes and the

decisions that they make rather than just normalising their experiences.

Moreover, individualisation has been considered as only available to the middle class, with the continued massification of the working class (Skeggs, 1997). Devine (2004) has been particularly critical of Goldthorpe's focus on the economic, and has pointed to the ideas of Bourdieu relating to social class, capitals and the accumulation and storing of advantage as useful in providing greater illumination in relation to educational choices.

Alternative viewpoints are additionally found amongst post-structuralist perspectives, such as that of Davies (1990; 1991), who posits the role of agentic chooser as available only to some people, most usually middle class men. Post-structuralist perspectives may be seen to offer a more in-depth illustration of the complexities of choice processes, arguing that one's subjective identity is constituted through discourses, and that these discourses ultimately limit the range of choices available to the individual (Watson, 1997; Alloway and Gilbert, 2004). With reference to school choice, Watson (1997) notes that it is problematic to assume that all parents are free to determine their preferences, as preferences are delimited by prevalent discourses: unlike neo-liberal theories, which draw on influences from the public sphere regarding how individual decisions are made, the gendered private sphere is also highly relevant to these processes. Furthermore, in relation to students' decision-making processes, Proweller (1997) asserts that post-structuralist discourses are informative, with students not being seen as merely being positioned by the various discourses present within the school, but rather, that they can also reposition

themselves in response to the meanings and practices which are available to them both within school and in the wider society.

Thus decision-making is seen as gendered and classed; that is, one's structural location necessarily affects how one makes sense of the world, and thus how one's choices are made (Watson, 1997; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). Furthermore, authors who have written about choice in relation to the middle class (Jordan *et al.*, 1994; Proweller, 1997; Devine, 2004) have highlighted that being middle class does not just affect how decisions are made, but that decisions made by the individual construct him/her as middle class.³⁰ Highlighting the integral role of class and gender in affecting the extent to which one can act in a way that may be regarded as rational (Reay *et al.*, 2005) is crucial here, but the term rationality is problematic, with its connotations of a systematic, emotionless and atomistic individual, making choices without regard for others (Archer, 2000). Furthermore, the concept of choice implies an entirely free agent, something that I reject on account of the inherent limitation of freedom by class and gender-based discourses. Ball *et al.*, (2002: 51-2) comment that 'where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint'. I will similarly refer to processes of 'decision-making' in this chapter. Moreover, decision-making for the young women at Midham is best considered as occurring, rather than as a rational choice, through processes of strategic reasoning, within the constraints of the position of chooser, to the extent that they can adopt this for themselves.

³⁰ Similarly, in relation to the choices made by young people from urban, working class backgrounds, Archer *et al.* (2007) note that these decisions are tied in with their sense of embodied identity, including factors such as their personal tastes and sense of style. These factors contribute to their construction as a particular type of person – in the case of the young people in Archer *et al.*'s study, a person who does not go to university.

The development and adoption of this role as chooser will be the subject of the following section.

Furthermore, there has been neglect of the consideration of young people's roles as agentic choosers in the currently-available literature relating to independent schools. Whilst there has been an increasing focus on listening to and including the voices of young learners in research (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996; Wallace *et al.*, 1998; Hughes, 2004), the decisions made by young people themselves are scarcely considered in the context of those who attend independent schools. Indeed, the focus of research has largely fallen upon parents' decisions to send their offspring to independent schools. This decision has been perceived as intrinsically linked to a privileged future for these young people, in relation to Higher Education and careers. For instance, in Fox's (1985) discussion of parents who chose to send their sons to a prestigious boarding school, these parents were referred to as 'purchasing privilege', choosing the school with the intention that their sons would progress on to Oxbridge or Sandhurst.³¹ Linkages are further drawn between students who have attended independent schools, and high-ranking universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Power *et al.*, 2003), although this is not necessarily the case for all schools in the independent sector, as discussed earlier. Input from parents who have attended prestigious universities has been considered to reinforce detailed guidance and powerful connections from the school in assuring places at such universities for young people who attend independent schools (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Students who attend independent schools have been

³¹ The Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst provides Officer training for the British Army.

presented as being pushed into applying to Oxbridge even if they do not really want to, in order that the school can boast of its high numbers of students accepted at these institutions (Power *et al.*, 2003), and furthermore, these schools have been shown as having links with these institutions through staff members who were educated there, who have contacts which they can utilise in order to help their students in gaining places there (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Reay *et al.* have also demonstrated that the independent schools in their study had more experience in terms of sending students to prestigious Higher Education institutions, and were thus more able to tailor their Careers advice to students, and the references that they wrote for them, to the appropriate audience. Institutional capital from the school and cultural capital from the home was thus translated into academic capital, leading to an advantage for these students when it came to applying to university.

In the case of Midham School, not all of the students' parents had attended university. My questionnaire responses revealed that only 24.2% of mothers and 41.9% of fathers of Sixth Form students at Midham had attended university. Consequently, the necessary link which has been drawn in some studies (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) between parental attendance of Higher Education and young people educated in independent schools must be negated. Moreover, for young people who attend independent schools, parents and other family members are considered to have a strong influence on young people's decision-making at this stage (Allatt, 1993; 1996); Reay *et al.*'s (2005) study even highlights parents choosing their child's Oxbridge college on their behalf. By contrast,

in studies which focus on the maintained secondary school sector, post-16 decisions are seen as predominantly made by young people themselves, with support rather than overall control from the family (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000). The role of the young person who has been educated in the independent school as she develops into a decision-making agent has thus been denied.

This is not to refute the idea that parents and the wider family have a considerable influence on the choices that are made, and these will be explored in depth in later chapters. Indeed, these sources of advice and recommendations, and the tacit and explicit discursive messages that the young women received from these sources provided a framework within which their own agentic decisions were made. This is further illustrated in the following section, which explores how the young women at Midham progressed from dependent children, to independent, decision-making young adults. This section focuses on choice-making at various stages during these young women's school lives, and how these decisions were presented in the school marketing materials, by the students themselves in interview and questionnaire responses, and how they were perceived and portrayed by members of school staff, particularly those responsible for marketing the school and careers guidance. The impact of discourses which were dominant within the school forms a particular focus of the section, as well as how these changed over time as the young women matured and progressed through the school.

Developing the Middle Class, Female Decision-Maker

As they grow up, young people both construct themselves and are constructed (by others and by structural relations) into particular roles (Davies *et al.*, 2001; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Chapman, 2005).

One such role is that of the autonomous, decision-making agent. Schools have been identified as playing a key role in the construction of young people as decision-making agents, who are responsible for their own self-construction through the decisions they make (Davies and Bansel, 2007).

However, the extent to which one constructs oneself into this role is necessarily delimited by discourses occurring within one's structural background (Davies, 1990; Proweller, 1997). In learning to use the discursive practices available in one's own social world, one learns what it means to be a person within that setting.

Discursive practices both at Midham School and occurring externally to the school (for instance, within the family) aided and shaped the construction of the young women educated within the school as particular kinds of decision-making agent. Their decision-making personhood was consequently heavily imbued with structural notions, particularly relating to class and gender, and the decisions they made relating to education, training and/or careers were necessarily contingent upon this.

Marketing materials produced by the school, such as the school prospectus and Sixth Form options booklet, emphasised the students' expected progression as decision-makers, from children whose role was

predominantly passive and on whose behalf decisions were made, to young adults who are confident and capable of making their own decisions. In turn, this illustrated the school's ethos, what parents want and will expect the school to provide for their daughters, and how the school saw its own role in this.

The prospectus was sent out, on request, to all parents who were considering educating their daughters at Midham. Copies were also available for visitors (prospective pupils and their parents) to take away at the school open day. The prospectus was a glossy, A4 sized publication, filled with images of young women at various stages in their educational careers, taking part in various activities such as sport, technology, performing arts and academic study. Its general tenor reflected a target audience of parents, although Linda Johnson, the marketing coordinator at Midham (who had been involved with the design of the prospectus) told me that the school had also considered prospective pupils when designing it, deliberately including lots of photographs of current pupils taking part in various activities that may appeal to them.

A double-page spread in the prospectus covered each of the stages of education at Midham (the Early Years and Junior School; the Senior School; the Sixth Form). More than half of each double page was taken up by pictures, something which has been discussed by Copeland (2001) as a common feature of school prospectuses, particularly those of independent schools. These included photographs of girls being taught how to use computers, having lunch and reading in the case of the Early Years and Junior School; the Senior School was represented by girls using the library

and in a design technology lesson, and on the pages about the Sixth Form, young women were shown relaxing in the Common Room, carrying out experiments in a Science laboratory and discussing work with a teacher. The girls (children) in the pictures representing the Junior School and Early Years were largely passive, with teachers (adults) playing the more active roles. In the picture of girls using a computer, for instance, the students were watching whilst a teacher demonstrated how to use it. By contrast, the young women on the ‘Sixth Form’ pages were far more active in their poses, with two young women in the science laboratory showing a female teacher the results of a science experiment, and another young woman looking confident in discussing her work with a male teacher.

In this way, these pictures illustrated clearly the expected progression from dependency to agency. Furthermore, they showed the kind of subjectivity which the young women within the school were expected to develop. This was clearly a particular form of gendered and classed subjectivity, with confidence in interacting with males and in participating in traditionally male-dominated activity; although later pages in the prospectus place greater emphasis on traditionally feminine pursuits such as dance and drama, as did other forms of promotion such as the Open Day.³² This was clearly a particular kind of agency, one that was within the boundaries of construction as a ‘good’ pupil (Davies *et al.*, 2001), participating actively in academic work.

This progression from passive recipient of knowledge to active subject was further replicated in the text of the prospectus. The junior

³² These feminised aspects will be discussed further in the following chapter.

school at Midham was for girls aged 2 ½ to 11 (and boys aged 2 ½ to 7), with entry at any age providing places were available within the appropriate academic year-group, after an informal assessment. The prospectus text about the Early Years and Junior School presented a passive and dependent view of their education, with an emphasis on the ‘caring, secure environment’, the subjects studied, school trips and available extra-curricular activities. At this stage, the same curriculum was followed by all pupils, therefore no choices had to be made about what to study.

With respect to decision-making at this stage of education, the prospectus was clearly targeted at parents, with girls expected to have very little, if any input into choosing their school. In discussion of primary school choice, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001: 204) note that ‘Five year olds do not choose their own school. Their parents do, on the basis of their own values and aspirations for their children’. Indeed, this was clearly the case for the majority of young women at Midham. Of the 62 respondents to my questionnaire, 20 had attended since the Junior School. These students were evidently little able to exercise agency or autonomous decision-making skills when the school was chosen, due to their very young age, with 50% stating that the decision had been made by their parents alone and 50% by their parents with input from themselves.

These findings were reinforced during my interviews with the young women. When asked about how the decision was made for them to join the school, those who had joined at an early age attributed this decision wholly to their parents. For example, Jenny, a student from the Lower Sixth, had attended Midham since she was five years old, and referred to the decision

for her to go to the school as being made ‘completely by my family, because I was so small’. Another Lower Sixth student, Charlotte, had moved to the Junior school after attending a small, state-maintained, village infant school. She too considered that the decision for her to move to Midham had been made by her parents ‘because I wasn’t really going to make much contribution, because I was only about seven at the time’. Her parents had decided against the local maintained schools, which they had not liked, and had decided that she should attend an independent school. Consequently, they had decided on Midham on the recommendation of a friend from their village, whose daughter already attended the school. Such decisions on school choice are clearly based on much more than a cost-benefit analysis, and are additionally replete with structural discourses based on gender and social class. The choice of a single-sex school has, for instance, been described by Watson (1997) as necessitating mediation and negotiation of a wide range of discourses surrounding single-sex schooling and femininity, such as the ethos of ‘protection’ from the distraction and disruptive influence of boys in the classroom. Furthermore, it is clearly a decision that is delimited by class. With average fees of £3,391 per term for an independent school (£2,707 for a day school and £6,712 for boarding school) (ISC, 2007), independent education is likely to be beyond the reach of most working class and even some middle class parents, thus it is a choice only open to a small number of parents. By deciding on an independent school for their daughters, the parents of the young women at Midham were giving them certain ideas about how decisions should be made, such as the prioritisation of education within the family. This is

similar to the findings of Johnson, 1987 and Jordan *et al.*, 1994, who have referred to families who use independent schools sacrificing family holidays and new cars in order to afford the school fees. Furthermore, this links to the possibility of seeing oneself as a potential chooser. By entering into the middle class ‘circuit of schooling’ (Ball *et al.*, 1997) where discerning between a range of options is a fact of life, the parents constructed themselves as able to make decisions about education and the future, and their daughters, as they got older, were likely to see themselves as having the potential for this too.

As very young children, however, they had little agency, and tended to be ‘acted upon’ rather than having the subjective freedom to choose their own fate. That said, it has been argued that it is increasingly the case that young people are being given a degree of decision-making power by their parents when choosing an independent school, although this choice is frequently within bounds delimited by the parents (Gorard, 1996; 1997). This was evidenced by my questionnaire data. The data from the 31 young women from the Sixth Form who had entered the school at the age of eleven shows that 67% (21) of these considered that the decision had been made by themselves and their parents together, and an additional four students (12%) said that they had been able to make the decision themselves. The school recognised this increased influence on the decision-making process from girls at this age, and this had led Linda Johnson, the marketing coordinator for the school, to target recruitment activities accordingly. Consequently, as well as school Open Days, which were targeted at both potential pupils and their parents, Taster Days were arranged, which primarily targeted potential

pupils.³³ On these days, girls who were considering moving to Midham at age eleven were able to visit the school for the day, and take part in activities such as drama or languages. Linda Johnson considered that these days would lead to girls being enthusiastic about the school as they would have enjoyed the activities, and consequently would ask their parents if they could go there. Whilst the parental role in this is still evident, as it is unlikely that a girl of this age would initiate a discussion about attending one of these Taster Days, when it is considered alongside other schools which these families were choosing between, which only offered Open Days, it can be seen how young women, given the option by their parents, might choose Midham over and above other options.

This increased influence from students with regards to school choice at this age could be seen in student accounts from Midham. For example, Jane, a Lower Sixth student who had joined the school at the age of eleven, told me that the decision for her to go to Midham had been a joint one between her and her parents. Her parents had offered her a range of schools to choose from, and she had been allowed to choose which one she liked best. Rachael and Allie, from the Upper Sixth, had also been offered a range of schools to choose from at age eleven by their parents, although both of these students commented that their parents had specified that they wanted them to go to an independent school, which had reduced the number

³³ Linda Johnson told me that many of the girls who joined the school at the age of eleven had attended independent junior schools in the local area, although there were also a significant number who moved to the school from maintained sector primary schools. Further to this, a large number of students joining the senior department at the age of eleven had previously attended the junior school at Midham. All of the girls in the Lower Third (National Curriculum Year 6, the final year of the junior school) were invited to Open Days and Taster Days, and these were also advertised at 'Future Schools Days' organised by some of the local independent junior schools, and in the local newspaper.

of options that they had been offered. A number of other students, such as Nicole and Victoria, both from the Upper Sixth, said that their parents had specifically wanted them to go to an all-girls' school. This is similar to Gorard's (1996; 1997) notion of 'choice sets', where parents choosing independent schools for their children allow them to make a decision between a range of schools, all of which the parents have previously discerned as suitable, and also links to discourses of suitability of different types of school based around class and gender.

Financial factors further restricted the decisions made at this stage by a small number of young women. Although both Kerry and Eleanor had been considering either Midham or the nearby Princess Alice High, an academically selective and highly prestigious independent school for girls, they had each won scholarships to Midham, which their families had persuaded them to take up. Eleanor described her decision to go to Midham as her own, but 'probably motivated by parents, because [...] at the time, we needed the money [...] otherwise, I would have gone to another school'. Her own preference had been for Princess Alice High, where she had been offered a place, but her parents had persuaded her otherwise. As the young women gained greater influence in the choice process, they also gained knowledge of its limitations for them as young women from a middle class background. This can be further seen in the case of Joanna, who commented that she would have preferred at the age of eleven to go to a local comprehensive school that her friends from primary school were moving to. However, her parents had insisted that she go to Midham, leading her to feel that her parents had made the decision for her. However,

she had grown to love the school, and was, at the time of interview, glad that her parents had chosen it for her.

Thus, overall, it can be seen that as the young women progressed into their senior school years, they became increasingly involved in decisions about their education, but also gained more knowledge of potential limitations to their choice. This became increasingly relevant as they moved to the post-14 stage of their education, where the things that are learnt and decisions that are made became increasingly relevant to the world after school, of further study or training, and/or future career (Pring, 2005).

The sections of the Midham prospectus that focussed on the senior school highlighted this, emphasising the help and guidance that the young women would receive in negotiating their pathway through the available options at this stage. Emphasis in the prospectus was placed on the extensive help and guidance available to pupils in their PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) and Careers lessons, and how these might help pupils in making informed and confident choices. However, the discourses present in the school at this stage were not only those of guidance in the decision-making process, but also emphasised the trajectories which they, as middle class young women, were expected to follow. Indeed, an emphasis on following a ‘standard trajectory’ (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) through education, from compulsory schooling, to the Sixth Form, then Higher Education and after this, a professional career was both tacitly and explicitly conveyed to the young women throughout their educational careers at Midham. This reinforces similar observations of young women in an independent school, made by Roker (1993).

This emphasis on university as a natural progression for these young women was conveyed in Careers lessons throughout the school. Similar to the students from independent schools discussed in previous studies (Pugsley, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005) the young women at Midham were encouraged to start thinking about educational and career choices from an early age, with Careers lessons and related talks for students occurring from the Upper Fourth (Year 9) onwards. Students were not explicitly encouraged to make decisions about options and careers at this stage, but rather, to start thinking about the things which they may want to do in the future. For Upper Fourth students, this was done through the use of a role-playing game called ‘the Real Game’.³⁴ This was a role-playing game designed for use in schools, which was played over a number of Careers sessions during the school year. In this game, students had to take up roles of people with different jobs, and to work out what sort of lifestyle they could afford, and what qualifications they would need in order to get to the desired career position. This encouraged them to consider these things in relation to their own futures. From playing this game, a tacit discourse was thus conveyed to the young women that to get a particular lifestyle, they would need a particular level of qualifications, which would involve following the aforementioned standard trajectory.

Students had to choose their GCSE options by the end of the Upper Fourth. The Careers teacher, Kathryn Williams, as well as the students’ form and subject teachers provided the main sources of in-school information about options. Whilst Kathryn Williams said that she felt that

³⁴ See www.realgame.co.uk.

students ‘don’t close any doors by choosing particular subjects, and deciding to stop studying other subjects’, she did discuss with students the options, in relation to Further Education and careers choices, which they could pursue after having studied particular subjects for GCSE. This introduced to the students the idea of decision-making and the need to consider various future options when making decisions about what to study, whilst encouraging them to see GCSEs as one step along a natural progression through an academic based and middle class dominated educational trajectory.

Whilst choices at GCSE level tended to reflect students’ growing independence and autonomy, some students felt that their parents had remained influential in their decisions at this stage, although the amount of parental influence and sway over their daughters’ choices varied from family to family. Charlotte’s mother, for example, still had considerable influence over her daughter’s decision-making when Charlotte chose her subjects for GCSE at the age of fourteen. Charlotte wanted to study PE as one of her GCSE options, but her mother wanted her to study Latin, and the two subjects clashed on the timetable. Consequently, Charlotte conceded to her mother, and studied Latin. She said that she was glad to have studied Latin, as she had enjoyed the subject, but felt that her mother had shaped her choices for her at this stage. By contrast, Charlotte’s friend Joanna stated that whilst her parents had insisted on her going to Midham, once she was there, they wanted her to choose the options which she personally wanted to do and liked. She felt that this had been positive for her, as she had enjoyed the subjects that she had chosen, and had consequently worked hard in

them. These short vignettes illustrate that whilst the young women were growing older and more autonomous, they still saw their parents as the ultimate arbiters of their decisions, perhaps reflecting the knowledge that if they chose against their parents' wishes, their parents would potentially be able to withdraw their funding of their offspring's education (Allatt, 1993, 1996).

Evidence of the substantial help that the young women were given in their development and self-construction as choosing individuals could be seen increasingly as they progressed through the school. This not only prepared them for lives as decision-making adults, but as decision-making middle class females, with all of the constraints and enablements that this identity brings with it. Their lives were to be shaped by the decisions they made, which were, in turn, shaped by discourses within the school they attended. Their identities as middle class female decision-makers could thus be seen as located in the decisions which they made, delimited by structures which were present both within and outside the school (Proweller, 1997). It is important, too, not to negate the mutual reinforcement of similar discourses and ideas in the school and the home, leading to the tacit conveyance to the young people of what is suitable for 'people like us' (Hutchings, 2003).

Careers lessons became more frequent for students at Midham in the Lower Fifth (Year 10), with fortnightly sessions taught by Kathryn Williams. In these lessons, the young women were encouraged to begin to consider different post-16 options. Whilst there was a focus here on AS and A2 Level options, Kathryn also talked to them about alternative options

such as GNVQs and other vocational college courses, which a small number of the students may wish to consider at this stage. She also gave a brief discussion of the option of taking up employment at age sixteen, although she told me that it was actually extremely rare for Midham students to wish to take this path.

Decision-making processes were explored further when students were in the Upper Fifth (Year 11). Again, there was much discussion of available education, training and careers options, with an overall emphasis on options involving remaining in the Sixth Form at Midham, as this is the expected trajectory of most students. However, these are not just discussed in terms of immediate decisions being made at the age of sixteen, but Kathryn Williams tried to relate these options to future opportunities, that is, possible careers, and university or college courses that may be taken after A2 Levels. This further encouraged the young women to think about their desired future in relation to their current choices, and additionally reinforced the notion of evaluating and making decisions between various options within a standard, academic-biased educational trajectory.

At this stage, students' decisions demonstrated the exercise of a far greater amount of agency than they had when they were younger. All of my interview respondents described individual processes of reasoning, discerning between different available subject options and, in some cases, different educational institutions. Even those students whose parents had had an overriding influence on their earlier choices felt that they had had much more freedom in their choices at this stage. For instance, Charlotte, whose mother had insisted on her studying GCSE Latin rather than PE, had

been surprised to find that her mother had not tried to influence her decisions at this stage. Consequently, she had chosen to study AS levels in four subjects she particularly enjoyed, including PE.

Within the school itself, present discourses also emphasised processes of growing independence as the young women moved into the Sixth Form. Events such as the Sixth Form Open Day, taster days where current Upper Fifth students visited the Sixth Form and took part in sample lessons of their prospective subjects, and a forum event where Sixth Form students were invited to talk to the Upper Fifth about their subjects all targeted the young women themselves. The only event out of these to which parents were also invited, the Sixth Form Open Day, still focussed on the young women as the ones who were to be largely making the decisions about whether to stay on at Midham and potential subjects for Sixth Form study. Thus whilst parental involvement and support remained apparent, and indeed, was encouraged, the young women were evidently assumed to have a greater degree of decision-making power at this stage.

Similarly, in the school marketing materials, text concerning the Sixth Form had a different feel, with a strong emphasis on becoming independent. Ideas about the school preparing students for entry into the adult world of university and work could be seen in the Sixth Form Options booklet, which was given out to all students attending the Sixth Form Open Evening.³⁵ The tone of this booklet again shows that during their time in the Sixth Form, students are expected to become active, decision-making young

³⁵ This event primarily targeted young women who were currently in the Upper Fifth at Midham and their parents. A small number of young women who have previously attended other schools enter the school each year at Sixth Form level, and any who wished to look round were also invited to this event.

adults. In the introduction to the booklet, written by the Head, Sheila Holmes-Brown, it was stated that during their time in the Sixth Form, it was hoped that students would ‘grow in confidence and maturity and develop a greater sense of independence’, which would enable them to feel ‘ready to face the demands of life after school’. Moreover, in a later section, written by Pauline Denham, the Head of Sixth Form, it is stated that ‘Sixth Form life gives you the chance to learn and practice the skills you will need in the adult world while you still have the support of your teachers and friends’. This explicitly shows the intention that the young women would become independent, but within a supportive environment, with autonomous adult life being seen as something which one needed to practice and become competent with. The fact that the Sixth Form booklet is targeted at young women rather than at their parents also reveals assumptions about their growing independence, with the young women rather than their parents expected to be making the final decision at this stage. This is a point which was also raised by Linda Johnson, the Marketing Coordinator, who pointed out that the school were aware that post-16 choices were largely made by students rather than parents, and that they had tried to target the marketing materials accordingly.

Further to this, in the school prospectus text concerning the Sixth Form had a strong emphasis on the young women becoming independent decision-makers. Whilst parents may have been primarily concerned with their daughters’ safety and security when she was younger, at this stage there is recognition that the young woman needs to be prepared for adult life, and this means becoming an independent individual, capable of making

her own decisions. This was illustrated in the prospectus: 'In these final years at school we hope that our students will develop the self-reliance, independence and confidence which are necessary for happiness and fulfilment'. Furthermore, allusion was made to the school Careers guidance programme, which helps students 'to make appropriate choices'.

This last statement epitomises students' development into choosers within structural confines. It not only shows that students were to be helped and guided to become decision-makers (Davies and Bansel, 2007), but that they were to be guided to make particular types of decision, which were deemed to be appropriate to their position as middle class females. This statement implied tacit collusion and agreement between parents and the school regarding students' futures. This similarity in goals between parents and the schools they choose for their offspring is illustrated by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001).

Indeed, the decisions that these young women were beginning to make about their futures tended to reflect earlier decisions made by their parents, thus pointing to the importance of considering notions of the input of familial habitus alongside decision-making processes (Devine, 2004). For instance, Joanna's parents had seen her education as a high priority, having decided (against her initial wishes, as mentioned earlier) that she should go to an independent school from the age of eleven. Further to this, when Joanna was sixteen, her parents had been concerned that they could no longer afford her school fees, and Joanna had looked round a number of local comprehensive schools and Sixth Form colleges, although her own preference had been to stay at Midham. Her parents had eventually

managed to find the money to enable her to stay on, although Joanna was aware that this had been a struggle for them, and they had told her that they would not be able to offer her any financial help with respect to her Higher Education. Although she would have liked to move away from home to go to university, Joanna realised that this was not feasible financially. However, like her parents, Joanna had prioritised her education in her decision-making, and had decided that she would prefer to continue to live at her family home and attend a local university, rather than, for instance, not go to university. Her decision was made through assessing what were her priorities (her education, and the potential good job that Higher Education would lead to) and strategically selecting the option that would be the most beneficial to her, taking an alternate path when her preferred option was not available. This was clearly a form of reasoned decision-making, made within a neo-liberal context which reflected Joanna's implicit understanding of knowledge-economy-based discourse, emphasising the importance of the gaining of qualifications to the development of an individual successful learner (and future worker) identity (Nairn and Higgins, 2007). However, her decision-making was exercised within a framework of discourses from her home and school regarding what to prioritise, and what would be a suitable progression for her to make at eighteen. Similarly, Charlotte's decision to apply to a prestigious university for an academic course in Spanish and Philosophy reflects earlier discourses which were evident within her family relating to a perception of the prestige of traditional academic subjects (that is, her mother preferring her to study Latin rather than PE).

Thus it can be seen how discourses within the family and the school played an active role in shaping how the young women decided on their priorities, and ultimately, made decisions about their futures. In the following section, I will move to focus more closely on the Sixth Form at Midham, and how ideas not only about making decisions, but about making decisions appropriate to their structural location were conveyed both tacitly and explicitly to the young women through Careers lessons and literature.

Making ‘Appropriate’ Choices – Careers Lessons and Literature

The perceived function of the Sixth Form at Midham, in preparing students for life as agentic choosers in a middle class world, was briefly alluded to in the previous section, and will be returned to now. Educational decision-making constituted a significant focus of life for students in the latter years of their education at Midham, and this was particularly the case for those students in the Sixth Form. Indeed, many decisions had to be made at this stage: whether to stay on at (or in a small number of cases, move to) the school Sixth Form; which subjects to study at AS and A2 Level; whether to apply to university and if so, which institutions to select and courses to pursue; and in the case of receiving more than one offer, which of these to take up. These decisions constituted a large part of Sixth Form life, from informal conversations between friends or between students and teachers, to more formal careers lessons and presentations. All of the aforementioned were laden with discourses over how these decisions should

be made, and the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of available options.

The Careers room at Midham School was a small room in the Sixth Form block, containing several large bookcases packed with university and college prospectuses, as well as books about specific occupational areas and books which offered more general advice on making applications to Higher Education. Sixth Form students were encouraged to use this room during their free periods and lunch breaks, as an aid to their decision-making processes. Indeed, several of my respondents cited these resources as having been useful to them when making decisions. Isabel and Olivia, who were in the Lower Sixth when I interviewed them in February 2005, had recently begun to think about their options regarding university. They told me that they had looked in these books as a starting point when considering which subjects they might study and which universities they might apply to. Similarly, Nicole, an Upper Sixth student who would be the first in her family to go to university, told me that as well as gaining extensive advice from Kathryn Williams, she had used the materials in the Careers room as one of her main sources of information regarding decisions about institution and course.

The books available in the room tended to present one's final decision on where to go to university as ideally coming out of a process of considering available options, rejecting these according to what is prioritised, until a final option is left which will afford the greatest possible utility or benefit. For instance, one of the books available, which is used widely in Careers guidance at this stage, is *Degree Course Offers* by Brian

Heap, published in yearly editions. At the time of my research, the 2003 version of this book was on the shelves of the Careers library at Midham.

The book begins with the statement that 'Choosing a career or course of study is not easy. There is much that applicants need to know in order to make decisions that are right for them as individuals and each year they will spend a great deal of time exploring various options' (Heap, 2003:i). Heap thus emphasises the idea of the informed and objective decision-maker, going through stages of exploring and rejecting various options before making a final choice. Further to this, later in the book, the key areas for consideration are defined for the reader. The primary decision, Heap argues, is whether to go to university or not, and this is followed up by a consideration of course choice. Here, Heap explores the option of continuing with a subject which one is studying currently, or a different subject based on outside interest (e.g. archaeology, film studies) or a future career (e.g. medicine, law). Heap further states that course choice should take priority over the decision to go to a particular university or college, as the course has to be studied for three, four or even five years and if the student does not enjoy it, they are more likely to drop out. He then goes on to note that when choosing a university, it is important to identify the location, travel costs, courses on offer, how one's course of study will be organised, the cost of accommodation, leisure and social opportunities, available bursaries and scholarships, and study facilities.

The form of decision-making advocated here is overwhelmingly informed and objective, involving the consideration of mainly practical factors. There is little room for personal preference. Choice is portrayed as

a pragmatic and highly reasoned affair. Some consideration of lifestyle factors is made, but these are considered less important than the choice of the course, and practical issues such as transport and finances. It is also interesting that he emphasises that one should prioritise course over institution, when in some cases, for instance, students who remain in the family home rather than moving away to go to university, such as some of the students studied by Pugsley (2004) and Reay *et al.*, (2005), this kind of prioritisation may be impossible.

In lessons, too, decisions seemed on the surface to be presented in a similar way. Each Careers lesson focussed on one aspect of choice, and these were particularly connected to university entrance. Two lessons focussed on the choice of whether or not to go to university. Further lessons looked at choices relating to whether or not to take a gap year. Others were structured around choices of course and institution. The UCAS³⁶ application process was explained to the students in detail in these lessons, and, like the students from independent schools in Pugsley's study (2003, 2004), the young women from Midham received extensive advice both in lessons and on an individual basis about completing their UCAS forms.

Careers lessons presented choice-making as ideally following a process of reasoning, with the young women being encouraged to consider and evaluate the options that were available to them. This could clearly be seen in a Lower Sixth Careers lesson, which occurred in early November 2004, shortly after these young women began their time in the Sixth Form. This lesson focussed on making the decision of whether or not to go to

³⁶ UCAS is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, through which students must apply for admission to any of the Higher Education institutions in the UK.

university, and took the form of an informal discussion between Kathryn Williams and the students. The majority of the discussion focussed on reasons students might have for wanting to go to university, such as the potential for a higher salary, wider job prospects, access to particular occupations (such as teaching or medicine), and lifestyle related reasons such as moving away from home, making new friends, social and sporting activities and nightlife. However, reasons were also presented for why some students may not want to go to university, such as tuition fees, the desire to go into employment, and / or not wanting to move away from family and friends. It can be seen that here, factors affecting the decision to go (or not to go) to university were being set out for these young women, and they were being encouraged to consider whether these applied to their own situation. Further in this connection, they were given a handout at the end of the lesson, which listed on one side reasons why one might choose to go to university, and on the other, why one might not want to go.³⁷ This further emphasised choice as ideally being made by thinking through the positive and negative reasons behind each available alternative.

Although these processes of strategic and reasoned decision-making would appear to be similar to those highlighted in Rational Choice Theory (see for example, Becker, 1977, 1991, 1996; Coleman and Fararo, 1992), they in fact render it problematic. Whilst Rational Choice Theory implies choice is made in a vacuum, with no consideration of others such as family and friends (Archer, 2000), these choices were clearly impacted upon by a range of structural factors, which were both acknowledged and, indeed,

³⁷ These are presented as Appendix 10.

emphasised by the school. The decision-making process as portrayed in Careers lessons did not merely involve a calculation of which option would ensure the most utility in an economic sense, but was also intrinsically linked to classed and gendered subjectivities.

Discussion in Careers lessons surrounding the choice of a Higher Education institution was focussed around lifestyle-related issues, with social and recreational factors highlighted as a key consideration. The idea of a student not wanting to (or being unable to) move away from home, and therefore choosing a local university, was very rare, and thus was scarcely considered.³⁸ The majority of the students were able to decide on a university on the grounds of lifestyle, social and leisure-based factors, rather than purely economic factors. This contrasts with the mature and/or working class students in Archer *et al.*, (2003) and Reay *et al.*'s (2005) studies, who necessarily chose universities based on proximity to the family home and travel costs. Careers lessons therefore were geared towards decisions being made on these grounds, that is, that they would move out of the family home, and would want to attend a university where they could make new friends, and take up (or continue with) leisure activities.

Further to this, the types of university which were suggested to these students as suitable options were heavily based around particular discourses relating to gender and class. As has previously been discussed in my introduction, contrary to the usual portrayal of independent school students as ubiquitously moving on to places at top universities, Midham School was non-selective, and as such had a wide ability range. Whilst some students

³⁸ Holdsworth (2006) has noted that shifts in Higher Education policy have led to an overall increase in the numbers of young people who live at home whilst attending university: however, of my interviewees from Midham, only Joanna was planning to do this.

had been predicted three or four A or B grades at A2 level, and as such, were making applications to top ranking universities, others' expected achievements were more modest, with predictions of two D or E grades and hopes of a place on a degree (or occasionally a HND) course at a lower-ranking university or college. Out of my Lower Sixth interviewees, only Jenny was considering applying to Oxbridge, and from the Upper Sixth, Harriet had applied to Oxford but had been rejected after an interview. However, in spite of their wide range of abilities, the vast majority of the young women (57 out of the 62 who responded to my questionnaire) wanted to go to university, with four others claiming to be unsure and only one definitely wanting to go into employment at the age of eighteen.

In discussion in school Careers lessons of the selection of a specific Higher Education institution, particular universities were implicitly recommended to the students as suitable for 'people like them', and others were subtly discouraged as unsuitable. This was particularly evident in a Lower Sixth Careers lesson which I observed, which took place towards the beginning of the summer term in 2005. In this lesson, the students were being encouraged to begin considering which universities they may want to apply to. During the lesson, different types of university were discussed, ranging from 'old' traditional and 'redbrick' universities, to 'new' post-1992 universities and colleges of Higher Education. However, what on the surface was a lesson about different types of university also conveyed to the students underlying and tacit discourses about the suitability of different types of university for middle class young women like themselves.

During this lesson, Kathryn Williams showed the students an overhead projector slide with lists of different types of university (i.e. campus, city, pre and post 1992) on it, going over the different types of university one at a time, and providing additional comments and information. The information conveyed in this lesson not only helped the young women to start considering different types of university that may suit them, but also framed their decision-making through discourses relating to class, gender and academic ability.

The first list of universities to be discussed were the pre-1992, traditional and ‘redbrick’ universities, such as Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. When describing these, Kathryn told the young women that these were the universities generally considered to be the top in the country, and that some of them may wish to apply to these universities. She did emphasise to them, however, that these universities are difficult to gain places at, and recommended that students did not apply only to universities from this list. This has clear implications in terms of students’ abilities, as in many cases, as was mentioned previously, their predicted grades did not correlate with class-based expectations of applying to a top university.

Another list consisted of middle-ranking universities, including several post-1992 Higher Education institutions, such as Oxford Brookes University and the University of the West of England. In discussion of these universities, Kathryn noted that these were still good universities, and were highly rated for some subjects. She urged the students to consider applying to at least some of these universities. She also encouraged them to include at least one university with lower entry grades than their predictions.

as a ‘fall-back’ so that they would almost certainly be accepted by at least one university. Additionally, she suggested that they might wish to choose a small university or college, as this may have a similar environment to the small, friendly and supportive school in which they were currently being educated.

As well as linking again to discourses of ability, and to middle class expectations (especially from parents) regarding an expectation of applying to particular universities, this was also clearly a gendered discourse. Similarly to Watson’s (1997) analysis of parents choosing single-sex schooling for their daughters, a small, secure environment was seen as more suitable for these ‘nice’ middle class young women than the more threatening environment of a larger institution. Indeed, in spite of this encouragement to consider applying to lower ranking, post-1992 universities, in fact only certain universities were being presented as an option. Kathryn highlighted to the students that at some post-1992 institutions, there are a large number of mature students and students who live in their family home. She further suggested that going to these universities might make it harder for the young women to make friends, or to socialise outside university hours. Thus, whilst her recommendations were far from pushing only high status universities, as has previously been noted in relation to schools in the independent sector (Power *et al.*, 2003), the discourse in this lesson delimited the selection of universities that were perceived to be suitable for these young women to select from.

Choosing a university according to a perception of the other people who go there being similar to oneself is nothing new. Reay *et al.*, (2005)

refer to students from both middle class and working class backgrounds selecting universities because of there being other students of their ethnic background or religious affiliation there. Furthermore, these authors also refer to a tutor from an Access course³⁹ advising her students to apply to certain universities as previous students of hers had moved on to these and been happy and well-supported, whereas she did not recommend institutions where there were few mature students. Similarly, Halstead (2005) has discussed the problems which working class, mature students had fitting into a middle class dominated, pre-1992 institution, whereas those who attended a post-1992 institution had felt that this had a supportive atmosphere and other students with similar characteristics. Archer *et al.*, (2003) further noted that many working class and minority ethnic students in their study decided to go to universities where there were high proportions of students from a similar class and ethnic background to themselves. They were less likely to choose high ranking universities, which they tended to perceive as dominated by middle class people, unlike themselves. Hutchings (2003) has referred to middle class young people choosing certain universities and ruling others out on the basis of ‘what people like us do’. Overall, decisions about which university to attend would seem to be strongly influenced by discourses about which universities are attended by those similar to oneself. These discourses become imbued in the individual students’ habitus through events such as this Careers lesson, and this can have a considerable influence on the decision she will ultimately make.

³⁹ Access to Higher Education courses prepare adults from non-traditional academic backgrounds, particularly mature students, for access to undergraduate courses.

Decision-Making Through a Process of Reasoning – Some Vignettes.

From the above discussion it can be seen that the choices made by the young women at Midham followed a process of strategic reasoning, but that this occurred within a framework that was heavily defined by their structural position. These structural factors, including their family expectations and those of the school, their academic ability, their social class background and their gender, gave rise to discourses within their daily lives at home and school that promoted the following of a standard, academic-based trajectory, with their reasoned choices necessarily being made within this context.

The notion of reasoned choice within a structural framework can be further illustrated by drawing on a vignette of three young women, Victoria, Jessica and Harriet, who, at the time of interview (February 2005) were in the Upper Sixth (Year 13) at Midham. These three young women were good friends, confident and sociable, and had achieved well at Midham. Consequently, they were applying to predominantly high-ranking, pre-1992 universities. All three of these young women had submitted their UCAS forms⁴⁰, and had received some replies from the universities they had applied to. They had applied to six universities each – Jessica for a Law degree, Harriet for History and Victoria for Psychology. Indeed, Jessica described their university choices by this stage as ‘pretty much sorted’.

⁴⁰ The deadline for submitting UCAS forms is in January of each year, although at Midham, as in many independent schools, there is an internal deadline of mid-October, which corresponds with the deadlines for submitting applications to Oxbridge and to medical and veterinary science courses.

Reaching this position had involved a process of strategic reasoning: deciding on their priorities, eliminating universities and courses that they considered unsuitable or unviable (bearing in mind factors such as their social class background and ability), and finishing with the university and course that they considered to be best suited to them. This had started with their choices at Sixth Form level. For instance, Victoria told me that before she started in the Sixth Form, she had been fairly certain that she wanted to study Psychology at university, so had chosen her AS levels (Psychology, Biology, Religious Studies and History) with this in mind. Although she had considered discarding Biology at A2 level⁴¹, she had decided instead to carry on with this subject, as she had felt that Biology was more relevant to her future degree studies, and has instead taken History only to AS level. Harriet and Jessica also indicated that they had had fairly clear ideas of the area of university study which they wanted to go into when they chose their AS and A2 options, and had chosen their subjects accordingly; Harriet choosing A2 levels in History, English Literature and Politics, and Jessica studying English Literature, History and Chemistry. They all considered that their sixth form options had been useful and were in some way relevant to their future university study.

All three of these young women had, by the time of interview, received more than one offer of a university place. However, Harriet told me of her disappointment at receiving a rejection from her preferred university, Oxford and from her preferred college at her second choice

⁴¹ The majority of the young women at Midham studied four subjects at AS level in their first year of Sixth Form, thereafter in their Upper Sixth year discarding one of these subjects and studying three subjects at A2 level. A small number of young women took four subjects at A2 level, and a few lower-performing students chose to study only three AS levels and two A2 levels.

institution, Durham University. She had received an offer from another college at Durham, but it was a small, single sex college, which she was not too pleased about. Whilst she had enjoyed her education at Midham High School (which she had attended since the age of 14 when her family had moved into the area) she did not want to be educated in a single-sex environment any more, telling me that 'I can't stand another three years of this, I was so looking forward to getting out into the bigger, mixed environment'. She had received offers from two other pre-1992 universities, and was deciding which of these to take up. She was concerned that her parents would be disappointed if she did not take up the offer from Durham, which she perceived as more prestigious than the other universities that had offered her places, but surmised that they would want her to be happy, and she felt that she would be happier in a mixed rather than single-sex environment.

It can therefore be seen that Harriet had made her education choices so far through a process of strategic reasoning. She had evaluated the various options open to her and decided which universities she preferred out of those that she had applied to. It is important to bear in mind here that not only were the young women selecting universities, but the universities were selecting them. Since some universities and courses are very popular and heavily over-subscribed, gaining a place on the desired course may not be possible, resulting in a necessity to reconsider the original decision. For Harriet, when the situation had arisen that her first choice option was no longer available (rejection from Oxford) and her original second choice had now become unsuitable (the offer from a single-sex rather than her preferred

option of a mixed college), she had re-evaluated the situation and decided that another option (one of the other two universities which had given her an offer) was preferable. Her decision-making was, furthermore, intrinsically related to discourses about gender inherent in single-sex schools (Watson, 1997; Ball and Gewirtz, 1997; Coffey and Delamont, 2000) which tend to reflect liberal-feminist thinking and promote that young women can compete successfully with young men.

Harriet's friend Jessica, on the other hand, had had a reasonably straightforward progression in relation to her choice of university. Whilst her family had a 'tradition' of attending St. Andrews, a highly prestigious Scottish university (her parents had both studied there, and her older sister was a current student) she had decided against going there herself, as she wanted to study Law and needed to study English law in order to work in England. She had therefore chosen to apply to six universities in England, and had gained an offer of a place from her preferred university, Exeter, a pre-1992 university in the South-West of England. It can therefore be seen that Jessica was a young woman who had a clear idea of what she wanted to do eventually (practice law in England) and, through a process of reasoning, took steps which would enable her to eventually get there. This led to her rejection of the university that members of her family had attended, in order to attend a university that she considered to fit her goals more appropriately.

Victoria, the third of this group of friends, had also gone through a process of reasoned selection and rejection when considering which university to apply to. Her preferred university was Bristol, but she had been advised not to apply there by Mrs. Williams and by her peers, as this

university had recently been highlighted in the media (see, for instance, the *Guardian*, 2003) as actively discriminating against independent school educated students in the application process⁴². Notwithstanding this, she had decided to apply there anyway, and was awaiting the outcome of this application, although on account of these warnings, she was not confident of her chances of success. However, she had received offers from two other universities by that time, and had made the decision that she would take up one of these offers if her first choice university rejected her.

Again, this would appear to be a decision made through a process of strategic reasoning, with a back-up plan present in case of rejection from the preferred university. This highlights that not all options were equally available to these young women, and even when a personal decision had been made, rejection from the preferred university could necessity further decision-making. Victoria's decision to apply to Bristol can be further related to her social class position – middle class young people, particularly those who attend independent schools, have been found to be more confident than working class young people in their own abilities when selecting universities to apply to (Sutton Trust, 2005). Moreover, Victoria's case provides a powerful example of how discourses within the peer group, school and even the media can influence young people's decision-making and their confidence in the efficacy of these decisions, and lead them to make particular choices (or in Victoria's case, back-up choices in case of the

⁴² Indeed, one day when I was talking to Kathryn Williams, she mentioned a student who had applied to Bristol although advised against it, and whilst she did not mention the student's name, I assume she was talking about Victoria. She cited several examples of young women from Midham who were high performing in an academic sense, but who had been rejected from Bristol University, which had led to her advising students not to apply there. However, with its high proportion of students from independent school backgrounds, it would be difficult to say that there is blanket discrimination in this respect.

failure of the first choice). This would seem to point to university decisions not just being individualised and reasoned by the individual, but that they are strongly influenced by discourses external to the individual.

Overall, then, these three students had used processes of reasoning, but underlying these are factors relating to their structural background. They were choosing between a specific set of options that were delimited by their social class background, gender and ability. None of them said that they had considered not going to university at all, or living at home and going to a local university. Rather, it seemed natural to them to go to university and live away from home in order to do so, ideas that were reinforced by discourses inherent within both the family and the school.

Conclusion

As middle class young women, Midham School students chose between a set of options delimited by discourses inherent in their backgrounds. Within this delimited framework, decisions were made that were 'appropriate' to middle class young women, as conveyed through tacit messages from the home and the school.

Not only were the young women constructed as middle class subjects through these discourses, but through these positions of agentic subjectivity they were able to construct themselves as middle class. Their structural position meant that becoming a reasoning decision-maker was something that was possible to them, and they were thus able to make decisions between a wide set of options, although their structural position

did limit them, on the whole, to mainly academic options at middle class dominated universities.

Whilst decisions which the young women made can be described as strategic, and follow processes which can certainly be described as reasoned, RCT as a whole must still be rejected in this context, on account of its lack of consideration of background factors, which can be seen here to be pervasive where educational decision-making is concerned. Decisions cannot be separated from their context, as it is this that constructs and deconstructs the chooser. Although Goldthorpe's (1997) more sociological version of the theory can provide illumination in relation to class, it is but one structural factor alongside others such as gender and ability which are influential in decision-making. Furthermore, it is necessary to see class not just as two oppositional groups, but as consisting of various fractions (Savage, 1995; Crompton, 1992), with variation between individuals and the extent to which they take up (and are able to take up) structural discourses.

The pervasiveness of structural factors does not, however, mean that agency is totally rejected here. Indeed, without agency, it would not be possible to explain how students made decisions which were highly personalised, sometimes acting against the explicitly and tacitly expressed expectations of their parents and the school (for instance, Victoria's decision to apply to Bristol, Harriet rejecting a place at Durham in favour of a less prestigious university, Charlotte taking an AS level in PE).

Rather than individuals acting as objective, autonomous, entirely free agents, they can instead be viewed as experiencing different gendered and classed subjectivities, and the discourses within these regulate the

decisions that are made (Davies, 1990). Through making their decisions within these structural discourses, they define themselves as middle class young women. Further consideration of the construction of gendered identity for the young women educated at Midham School will be made in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Construction of a Gendered Identity at Midham School

Introduction

My previous chapter explored how the young women in the Sixth Form at Midham School became constructed as subjective decision-makers through the presence of particular discourses within the school. This chapter further explores how gendered discourses which were intrinsic within the school further shaped students' identities as young women.

Gendered identity is created through discursive practice: one becomes a young woman through engagement with and participation in discourses which relate to what a young woman is and does (Watson, 1997; Proweller, 1997; Davies *et al.*, 2001). This is bound up with other discourses which further shape one's identity, relating to structural factors such as social class and perceived academic ability. All have an impact on one's integral dispositions (in Bourdieusian terms, one's habitus) and this has a structuring effect on one's life and the decisions that one makes, both in relation to one's current position and the future.⁴³

In this chapter it will be revealed how, right from the initial decision made by the family to consider Midham School as a possible location for their daughters' education, discourses within the school relating to a

⁴³ Here, the issue is raised of potential ambiguities, tensions and contradictions in relation to the concept of discourse as something which the young women were both constructed by and in which they played a participatory role. This can be overcome by recourse to the position advocated by Fairclough (2003), who argues that although aspects of the social world (that is, social institutions) are ultimately socially constructed, once constructed these become realities which affect and limit the discursive construction of the social. Moreover, he views texts (discourses), events and practices, and social structures, to be interlinked, with social actors as socially constrained by these without being entirely socially determined.

particular type of middle class femininity had a significant impact on the shaping of my respondents' identities as young women. The school's marketing materials (prospectus and website) and its institutional events (such as its Open Evening for prospective students and their parents) were identified as key sites for conveying the school's image and ethos, and these will be considered further in this chapter. Furthermore, the school's ethos and image were key topics in my discussions with members of school staff, particularly Linda Johnson, the school's marketing coordinator, whose role involved taking responsibility for representing the school on a public level. These aspects also emerged in some of my group interviews with the young women in the Sixth Form at Midham. All of these issues will therefore be addressed in this chapter.

Three main gendered discourses were identifiable at Midham. The first discourse centred on the availability of opportunities for young women ensuing from the utilisation of a single sex school, and could be linked to notions of equal opportunities and liberal feminism. Conversely, the fact that the school was not academically selective had led to a focus on achievement in other areas rather than purely the academic field, and consequently, great emphasis was drawn to extra-curricular activities. This led to a second discourse, based upon a specific kind of middle class-based femininity, and played out through the young women's participation in specific extra-curricular activities, particularly feminised activities such as the performing arts. The third discourse was one that was clearly apparent within the school's marketing strategies and materials and throughout the school itself, and was based on an ethos of friendliness, protectiveness and

extensive support for all members of the school community. Whilst this discourse was viewed positively by teachers and students at Midham, it had the potential to become a more problematic discourse of academic dependence and a more traditional (and suppressive) form of femininity. Finally, the conclusion to the chapter will point to how these discourses worked together to engender in these young women a particular kind of femininity.

I begin with a brief discussion of the background literature surrounding the role of the school in creating a gendered identity. Schools have long been considered to have a profound and shaping impact on the lives of those whom they educate. Acting through the teachers within them, schools are able to exercise control over the knowledge that is conveyed within them (Young, 1971). Not only do schools teach curriculum knowledge, but also transmit to their students ideas about social values and gendered norms (Coffey and Delamont, 2001), and as a reflection of the society in which they are located, can embed or transform students' perspectives in relation to these values and norms (Delamont, 1990). Recent studies in the field of Higher Education decision-making (Reay, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Pugsley, 2004) have drawn on the Bourdieusian concept of institutional habitus to show the effect that the educational institution attended has on the decisions made by young people in relation to Higher Education. However, the aforementioned studies tend to focus on the differences between those middle class young people who attend independent schools and those who attend colleges and schools in the maintained sector. Although all of the above studies feature independent

schools that are single sex, this is not specifically focussed on as an area of study. Yet as well as their selectivity on the grounds of social class, the fact that these schools are single sex leads to the embedding of particular discourses surrounding gendered norms and possibilities, which may also have an impact on the decisions made by their students.

The current gendered discourses within single-sex independent schools can be considered to reflect their origins and histories. As was discussed in detail in chapter 1, some of today's independent schools for girls were set up in the late 19th Century in order to provide an academic education for girls, leading to university entry (Kamm, 1965, 1971; Walford, 1993; Delamont, 1989), whereas others at their origins were less academic and centred around the teaching of 'the accomplishments' such as music and dancing (Delamont, *ibid*; Coffey and Delamont, 2001). Morevoer, in spite of the liberal feminist ethos of equality of opportunity inherent within particularly the academic girls' schools, at their origins and for several years afterwards the role of these schools tended to be to provide a kind of cultural 'fitting out' of the young women who attended them. They were expected to reproduce their families' positions in the middle class through marriage to professionals rather than through gaining this type of employment themselves (Connell *et al.*, 1981; 1982). Academic work was not neglected completely, but these schools tended to cater to young women's expectations of a short career before settling into marriage and motherhood.

Today, the situation is very different, with young women who are educated in independent schools largely intending to go to university and

follow professional career paths (Roker, 1993; Proweller, 1997; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, in Roker's (1993) study of young women at an elite single sex independent school in England, the young women expressed wishes to marry and have children, but intended also to have independent professional careers. Similar wishes were expressed by the young women in Proweller's study (1997) of an elite girls' school in the USA, where they young women tended to be aiming for professional careers. Additionally, longitudinal studies by Power *et al.*, (2003; 2005; 2006) have shown that young people of both sexes who were educated in independent schools tend to progress on to high status professional careers.

Single sex independent schools have not been without their critics. For instance, due to the mode of egalitarianism and equal opportunities prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, single sex schools, particularly in the independent sector, appeared elitist and outmoded, and arguments were put forward by reformers for the necessity of educating boys and girls together to ensure equal access and equal opportunities within education (Deem, 1984). By contrast, other authors have argued for their continued relevance. Proweller (1997) has noted that single sex schools provide an alternative to the unequal power relationships, sexual inequalities and school outcomes which are perpetuated by co-educational learning environments, considering that co-educational schools could learn from the success of girls' schools in this area. In a similar connection, girls' schools have been argued to have had considerable relevance historically, for instance in promoting the teaching of high quality science and mathematics to girls in the 1950s to 1980s, when its promotion in the maintained sector was minimal (Delamont,

1989; Coffey and Delamont, 2001). At this time, the majority of female scientists were educated at single sex independent schools, as were leaders from other professional and public fields (*ibid*).

There is a continued discourse of liberal feminism and increased opportunity for girls through an education separate from boys within single sex schools in both the maintained and independent sectors today. Ball and Gewirtz (1997) highlighted this semiology of girls' schools as empowering, and its integral relationship to liberal, progressive feminism, in discussion of the marketing strategies taken up by two single sex (girls) schools in the maintained sector which were part of their wider study on parental school choice (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball *et al.*, 1997). Both schools in their marketing materials and on open days laid emphasis on the available opportunities for young women in traditionally male subjects, such as Science, Design Technology (DT) and Information Technology (IT). Whilst such opportunities have become more available to young women in all sectors of education, particularly since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 and the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, there remains a gap in entry levels by gender between subjects, particularly at post-16 and university level (Brown, 2001). Indeed, whilst examination entry by subject has become less unequal over recent years (Francis *et al.*, 2003), with some blurring of traditional gender-based subject preferences evident (Francis, 2000), students' subject preferences are not necessarily reflected in the options they actually take up, with evidence for the egalitarian effect of single sex schooling seemingly inconclusive. In a similar connection, Elwood and Gipps (1998) found that girls educated in single-sex schools in

the maintained sector were only marginally more likely to take non gender-stereotypical courses at A level and university, and Francis *et al.* (2003) found that girls educated in both single sex and co-educational schools tended to desire to enter feminised occupations, such as caring occupations and teaching. In the USA, Montgomery (2004) highlighted that both male and female college students tended to study gender-stereotyped courses. By contrast, studies of the independent sector have tended to indicate stronger preferences for non gender-stereotypical courses such as science and engineering (Roker, 1993; GSA, 2004).

The present liberal feminist, equal opportunities-based discourse has been perceived to co-exist alongside an alternative discourse of traditionalism within single sex schools (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997). Whilst Lee and Marks (1992) have highlighted differences between single sex independent schools for girls with a traditional and with a more progressive ethos, Ball and Gewirtz (1997) highlight the presence of both discourses in their case study schools. Furthermore, they draw attention to aspects of traditional femininity having held strong appeal to parents when they were making decisions about schools for their offspring. This was based around a specifically middle-class femininity, linked to participation and specialism in the arts, music, drama and modern languages. These can clearly be seen to link to previous ideas relating to the importance of the acquisition of 'accomplishments' to young women of previous generations (Delamont, 1989) with such feminised activities representing a modern version of these. The marketing of the two schools in Ball and Gewirtz's (1997) study also laid emphasis on specifically feminine characteristics, with displays of these

aspects of the school on open days purposely designed to appeal to young female prospective pupils and their parents.

Thus, it can be seen that in some respects, a more traditional form of femininity was desired by parents, prospective pupils and schools. and was consequently used as a marketing tool by schools. However, whilst allusions to a more traditional form of femininity may be a useful marketing tool, certain girls' schools, particularly those that are not academically selective, have also been found to foster a culture of academic dependence and less-than-rigorous instruction (Lee *et al.*, 1994). This is clearly a less desirable characteristic which has been identified in some schools of this type, and could be potentially problematic with respect to students' future lives beyond school. Certainly, such discourses must be counter-productive in relation to the aforementioned liberal feminist intentions which these schools purport to have.

All of these issues are pertinent for consideration with respect to Midham School. Indeed, the school could be seen to draw on a variety of discourses as part of its own ethos, encompassing those of liberal feminist equal opportunities; middle class based femininity; and protectiveness and security. These discourses are now dealt with in turn.

Discourses of Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is defined by Weiner as having 'arguably been one of the most enduring and accepted of all feminisms' (1997:145), and is based on assertions of equal rights and opportunities for both women and

men to determine their roles in social, political and economic spheres. Education is perceived by proponents of this viewpoint to have great importance in the removal of obstacles to progress for girls and women (Arnot *et al.*, 1999). Ball and Gewirtz (1997) note that such discourses have been taken up by girls' schools in their marketing, taking the stance that the 'escape' from boys which they provide leads to a possibility of increased self-confidence, high achievement and a progression to a professional career and public life. Parents have engaged with such discourses when making decisions about their daughters' education, perceiving that such schools will imbue academic and personal self-confidence (West and Hunter, 1993) and the gain of academic advantage by removing the presence of boys, who are perceived to dominate teacher attention (Jackson and Bisset, 2005; Watson, 1997). In the USA, Lee and Marks (1992) found that some parents choosing single sex independent schools for their daughters saw them as an opportunity structure, providing their daughters with an education that was academically oriented, equitable and empowering, and similarly, Proweller (1997) found that parents chose single-sex independent education for their daughters as they considered that it would give them an extra edge in the competitive educational and occupational marketplace. Conversely, some parents saw co-education as a reproduction of patriarchal society, serving to reproduce women's entry into traditional caring and domestic roles. In this connection, parents have been found to select single sex independent schools because of, rather than in spite of, the fact that they are single sex, citing academic and social advantage ensuing from single-sex education as reasons for their choice (Jackson and Bisset, 2005; Lee and Marks, 1992).

Such discourses were visibly utilised in the marketing strategies deployed by Midham School. Intrinsic to the marketing of the school was a focus on the benefits, both academic and social, of attending a single sex school. This was particularly emphasised in the marketing materials produced by the school, that is, the school prospectus and website. Prominence here was given to the idea of girls being able to build self-confidence and develop leadership skills in an educational setting where they would be separated from boys, as well as that their subject choices would be less gender-stereotyped. These discourses draw on ideas of liberal feminism, whereby single sex schools are viewed as offering the potential for equal opportunities with young men in relation to academic progression (Lee and Marks, 1992), and these discourses have also been seen to be appealing to parents (Jackson and Bisset, 2005; Watson, 1997).

The idea of students becoming more confident by being educated in a single sex environment was highlighted on the first page of the prospectus, and this continued as a recurrent theme throughout. This first page encompassed a ‘letter’ to parents of prospective pupils, from Sheila Holmes-Brown, the Head of Midham. This letter states the school’s intentions of providing a stimulating, single sex environment in which girls can develop:

[Midham School] are convinced of the value of an all-girls’ education which provides the opportunity for pupils to become confident and articulate young adults, aware that there are no limits to what women can achieve.

Further to this, towards the end of the prospectus there was a section devoted to leadership, and how Midham School was active in the preparation of its students to be future leaders in society. It is emphasised that training to take on leadership roles is important, as ‘women are playing an increasingly important role in society at management level’. Training to take up such roles was noted to be available within the school through the possibility of taking up positions such as Head Girl or House Captain, or through acting as a mentor for younger students. This is not only a gendered discourse of equal opportunity, but also a classed discourse, relating to the expectation that young women from middle class backgrounds will eventually work in a professional or managerial role, similar to those commonly occupied by their fathers (Lucey, 2001). This is likely to lead to particular expectations of the school in the eyes of prospective students and their parents: they expected to be encouraged into and prepared for these roles.

These discourses around equality of opportunity and take-up of male dominated subjects were indeed inherent throughout the prospectus. Emphasis was laid on the range of subjects studied by Midham students, and the possibility of achievement in all subjects. Indeed, this could be seen through the selection of photographic images used within the prospectus, which provided a semiological connection with liberal feminist discourses of equality of opportunity. Images which conveyed such a connection included those of young women using computers, in a science laboratory, partaking in a Duke of Edinburgh’s Award expedition and operating a drill in a design technology lesson. In the text of the prospectus, particular

emphasis was given to the development of skills in areas such as ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and Science, as well as the extensive provision for sporting activities, again pointing towards the availability of wide-ranging opportunities for young women educated at Midham.

Likewise, related sentiments could also be found on the school website, which further emphasised the possibility of young women being able to grow in confidence in a single sex environment. It is again stated that an all-girls' education will aid in the pathway to students becoming 'confident, articulate young women'. Further to this, a section of the website highlights reasons why families may choose a girls' school. Here, it is emphasised that girls in the single-sex classroom are more likely to 'play an active part in their learning' and to 'build confidence and self-belief'. Moreover, co-educational classrooms are criticised on account of boys' domination of teacher attention and the possibility of gender stereotyping, which is considered to lead to 'girls becoming more passive, less adventurous and more concerned with their appearance than their learning'. Girls' schools are also considered to give more opportunities for leadership. Finally, drawing on recent research by the Girls' School Association (GSA, 2004), it is stated that girls are more likely to choose to study Mathematics, Physical Sciences (Physics and Chemistry) and Modern Foreign Languages at A level in single sex schools than in co-educational schools.

In studies of parental school choice which focus on single sex education (such as Ball and Gewirtz, 1997; Watson, 1997; Proweller, 1997; Jackson and Bisset, 2005), discourses such as these have proved to be

seductive to parents. In these studies, parents tended to refer to their choice of single sex schools in liberal feminist terms, stressing the availability of opportunities for their daughters to develop confidence and have the opportunity to take up a variety of subjects. Indeed, within Midham School, teachers could also be seen to take up these discourses enthusiastically. For instance, in my interview with Veronica Smalley, the Head of Upper Fifth, I asked her about the subject choices made by the young women at Midham, and whether she thought that the fact that the school was single sex had an impact on the decisions that they made. Veronica felt that the school's single sex nature had had a positive impact on the take-up of certain subjects:

I think that we probably, because it's a girls' school, manage to dispel the fear of maths. [...] They're all encouraged to be as good as possible, in whatever area [...] in a mixed school, where you have all the boys doing maths, or physics, we don't have that.

However, although she felt that the single-sex nature of the school had shaped the young women's attitudes to traditionally male-dominated subjects, when I questioned her about this further she acknowledged that there remained less students taking up these subjects:

Helen: So is it like equivalent numbers taking physics to other subjects?

Veronica: We still don't have many doing physics but they're not put off by the fact that the boys would opt for it.

This statement acknowledges that whilst there was equality of opportunity to take up these subjects, they were not taken up by students in equal quantities. Rather, most students tended to opt for courses in the more traditionally female-dominated areas of the social sciences and humanities, a fact which was acknowledged by Kathryn Williams, the Careers teacher, who was very familiar with the subjects that students went on to study, as she compiled a list of students' university destinations every year:

Kathryn: Generally, we have far fewer students choosing sciences, than you might expect [...] very very few choosing physics, particularly... relatively decent numbers choosing maths, relatively high numbers biology, chemistry, but it does fluctuate from year to year. But when I do the breakdown in terms of analysing where they go on to university, it tends to be much more skewed towards arts, humanities, social sciences, rather than sciences. It's rare for someone to go on to engineering, for instance, one or two per year maximum [...] whereas you might have ten going on to read psychology [...] there are small numbers going through for medicine... physiotherapy is usually quite

popular, but not so much the true scientists. Very few go on to read pharmacy, or physics, or engineering.

This could clearly be seen to be borne out in the list of Midham School leavers' destinations for 2006,⁴⁴ published on the school website. The majority of these students had gone on to study social science or humanities subjects, with few studying science. Thirty-two out of the forty students in the year group (80%) had gone on to university, with the rest predominantly planning to take a gap year before going to university the following year. Of those thirty-two students, only six (18.75%) had gone on to study courses in science, mathematics or medicine. By contrast, twelve students (37.5%) had opted for courses in arts or humanities, with the remaining fourteen students (43.75%) studying social science or business studies-based courses. Furthermore, only 22% of the A2 level entries of that year group were in mathematics or science subjects, with only 7 out of 40 students taking A2 level mathematics.

However, although students' decisions relating to courses of study did seem to be skewed away from scientific subjects, this is not to say that the sciences were not supported. Indeed, among my interviewees, the young women who wanted to study science or mathematics⁴⁵ had found the school to be supportive of their decisions, and had gained substantial and useful advice from their teachers. Likewise, I observed Kathryn Williams

⁴⁴ Those who left the school in 2006 were in the Lower Sixth at the time of my research in 2004-5.

⁴⁵ Rebecca wanted to study Biology or Chemistry, Lucy wanted to study science but had not made a final decision on the subject, and Joanna wanted to study Mathematics.

giving extensive advice after one Careers lesson to a Lower Sixth student who wished to apply to study Medicine.

It remains questionable why, although there is ostensibly equality of opportunity in terms of availability of subjects and encouragement to study them, the take-up of subjects at Midham was far from equal. This is particularly surprising if it is considered that take-up of subjects in other single-sex schools would appear to be more equal. Using data obtained from the website of Princess Alice High School, a selective single sex independent school which was Midham's local 'rival', it could be seen that 38% of A2 level examination entries in 2006 were in Mathematics or Science (Physics, Chemistry, Biology), with Mathematics (studied by 25 students out of 62, 40.3%) the most popular subject at A2 level. Furthermore, a study by the Girls' School Association (GSA) in 2004, which is cited on the Midham School website, found that at A2 level, over 70% more young women attending GSA schools took mathematics, 50% more took at least one science, 90% more took a physical science (physics or chemistry) and over 80% more took a modern language in relation to all girls studying for A2 levels nationally.

One explanation for this difference could be students' own perceptions of their academic abilities, their 'academic self-concepts' (Sullivan, 2004). Sullivan has noted that boys tend to rate their abilities much higher than girls, particularly in the more stereotypically masculine subjects such as Mathematics and Science, even when their assessed ability is similar or lower. Contrary to the above ideas about girls being more confident in single sex education, Sullivan found that there was little

difference between those educated in single sex or co-educational schools.

Similar results were evident in a study by Stables and Stables (1995), who found in their study of a co-educational Sixth Form college that young women tended to lack confidence in their own abilities in subjects that they perceived as ‘hard’, such as mathematics.

Among students at Midham it could be seen that there was a perception of certain subjects being ‘harder’ than others are. The majority of subjects which could be studied at AS and A2 level had no specific entry requirement, other than the 7 C grade GCSEs which the school had established as a requirement to enter the Sixth Form. However, the three sciences and Mathematics all required at least a B grade at GCSE, with an A or A* grade necessary in order to study Further Mathematics. This may have acted as a deterrent for some students, who were less confident in their own ability and therefore opted for subjects with less stringent requirements. For instance, Allie, one of my interviewees who was in the Upper Sixth, had planned to study Chemistry for AS level, but the combination of having obtained a lower grade than she would have liked in GCSE Chemistry, and a higher grade in French, had caused her to change her mind and opt for the latter subject. Allie’s friend Suzanne had chosen to study Chemistry for one of her AS level options, but had decided not to carry on with this subject for A2 level ‘when [she] didn’t understand anything’. Similarly, Nicole, also from the Upper Sixth, had planned to take AS and A2 levels in scientific subjects and apply to study veterinary science. However, as her grades had not been high enough in some of her sciences, she had instead opted to study for A levels in Geography, Biology and History, with the intention of

studying Geography at university before moving into primary school teaching. Thus, it can be seen that for these young women, whilst their interest in studying science was apparent, their perception of these subjects as ‘difficult’ coupled with the more stringent entry requirements compared to other subjects offered by the Midham Sixth Form had acted as a deterrent.

It would consequently appear that for those students who wanted to study these subjects, and whose grades were high enough, there was evidence of much encouragement within the school. However, some students tended to be deterred by their perceptions of the subjects as difficult, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Students’ perception of their own academic abilities in these subjects may have been reflective of their actual abilities in the subjects in some cases: Midham was not an academically selective school, and consequently, catered for students whose academic ability was wide-ranging. However, the ethos of the school was to encourage achievement in all areas, not just the academic, and whilst students may not have been confident in their abilities in particular academic subjects, they tended to be more confident in other areas. Further, this represents a continuation of the school’s origins, as a small boarding school of the ‘finishing school’ type, where young women were educated in the ‘accomplishments’ and prepared for marriage rather than the workplace. Consequently, less emphasis was afforded to academic and masculine dominated pursuits, with a stronger focus on middle class biased cultural niceties such as playing the piano and dancing. This will be discussed further in the following section.

Extra-Curricular Activities: Discourses of Middle Class Femininity

The second gendered discourse which I wish to consider and which was evidenced at Midham relates to the prominence of extra-curricular activities within the school. Whilst girls' schools have been keen to promote discourses of equal opportunity and the encouragement of girls to study male-dominated subjects, they have also, conversely, been found to use discourses in their marketing that are associated with more traditional versions of femininity (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997). Ensuing from an emphasis on extra-curricular activities, particularly in areas such as dance, drama and music, these discourses have been considered to be particularly appealing to middle class families who are considering these schools. Extra-curricular activities have been considered appealing to those selecting independent schools of all types, whether co-educational or single sex (Gorard, 1997) and it is particularly those activities which link specifically to a middle class based femininity which are significant here.

There was considerable evidence for the existence of this duality of discourses (between equality of opportunity and traditional femininity) at Midham. Midham was a school that did not select students by academic ability, and they were keen to highlight in their marketing materials that ability in non-academic areas was equally valued by the school. For instance, in the initial 'letter' in the prospectus from Sheila Holmes-Brown, it was stated that:

Our principal aim is to enable all of our pupils to fulfil their potential in whatever area it may lie. We value a variety of achievements and each area of school life equally.

This theme was continued through into the later sections of the prospectus, where two double page spreads were devoted to extra-curricular activities, with the title ‘A Wealth of Opportunities’. Available activities are listed here, including several different performing arts groups (Drama clubs, choirs, orchestras and smaller instrumental-based music groups). clubs for various sports, and expedition-based activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award and World Challenge.⁴⁶ Large pictures appear on each page, of young women taking part in a drama production, being helped by a teacher to perform ballet exercises, participating in athletics and tennis, and taking part in a Duke of Edinburgh expedition. In the text, emphasis is given on these pages to the positive aspects of involvement in such activities, stating that:

We hope that every girl can find extra-curricular activities which are interesting and enjoyable. Participation can bring a sense of achievement and self-worth, and develop pupils' confidence and teamwork skills.

⁴⁶ The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award involves taking part in a selection of activities, including a service activity, a skill, some form of physical recreation and an expedition. The award is at three levels, Bronze, Silver and Gold, with increasing difficulty. World Challenge organise outdoor expeditions in countries all over the world for groups of young people, involving a mixture of physical challenges and cultural experiences.

Indeed, throughout the school a heavy emphasis was laid on the idea that achievement should not come solely from academic performance. This was a key aspect of the school's ethos. Kathryn Williams highlighted this in her interview with me, when talking about the ethos of the school. She pointed out that whilst the school wished to encourage students to achieve their potential academically, it also encouraged them to achieve in other ways, and to 'grow as a person, to mature, to develop confidence'. She believed that pupils would acquire these skills through becoming involved with activities and societies within the school, which would enable them to learn transferable skills, such as teambuilding and leadership, and give them opportunities for working with other students from different year groups.

These activities were not only valued for their positive benefits for the students within the school, but they also had a powerful impact within the school's marketing. This could be seen particularly on the school Open Evening, for prospective new Upper Third (Year 7) students and their families, which took place in October 2004. Making a decision to pay to educate a child in an independent school is a major financial commitment for most families, and it is to be expected that such decisions are imbued with images of a hopeful projected future for the child (Fox, 1985). Certainly, this particular Open Evening at Midham was replete with images of middle class femininity, with the clear intention of appealing to these families by showing them idealised images of what their daughter could become, as will be detailed below. The academic side of education at Midham was not neglected here, with classrooms featuring displays of students' work from different subjects, subject teachers available to talk to

parents, and a wall display highlighting the academic achievements and university destinations of the highest performing former students. Furthermore, in the talk that the Head, Sheila Holmes-Brown, gave to families, she initially discussed the academic results of the school, emphasising the fact that in a recent inspection report⁴⁷, the school had been commended for achieving relatively high academic results from a non-academically-selective intake.

However, the majority of the Open Evening focussed upon discussion of a particularly feminised and classed type of extra-curricular activities. In her talk, Sheila Holmes-Brown reiterated the point made in the prospectus, that the aims of the school were not purely for academic success. Rather, she stated that the aim was for all-round development, including the fostering of other skills, such as those of leadership, and kindness and respect for others in the community. She told parents that students would develop these skills through taking part in extra-curricular activities, of which there were many available in the school. She then went on to discuss the available activities, aided by a Powerpoint presentation containing pictures of students taking part in different activities. These activities included music, art, drama and a variety of sports such as tennis and hockey, as well as school visits to locations abroad, such as a skiing trip and the World Challenge Expedition. Further emphasis was drawn to the recent successes of the school's horse-riding team, who regularly competed

⁴⁷ Schools in England affiliated to the Independent Schools Council (ISC), such as Midham School, are inspected by the ISI (Independent Schools Inspectorate), a professionally independent arm of the ISC. It is recognised by the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) and by OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education) as the agency responsible for inspecting independent schools. A sample of its inspections are also monitored by OFSTED.

in events with pupils from another local (co-educational) independent school. On seeing the photographs and hearing about the range of available activities, several of the girls who were attending the Open Evening with their parents could be seen to be visibly enthused, grinning and nudging their parents when activities such as skiing and horse-riding were mentioned. Subsequent to this talk, there was an additional short presentation from the school's incumbent Head Girls, Suzanne and Kerry⁴⁸, who talked enthusiastically about the opportunities that the school had given them to take part in a variety of extra-curricular activities, such as drama, debating and sports.

Further to this, throughout the Open Evening, activities and performances took place in the school Gymnasium, Hall and Performing Arts Studio, which visiting parents and their daughters were invited to view. These included musical performances, rehearsals for the school play 'Bugsy Malone', a display of gymnastics and a badminton tournament. Additionally, in the school Dining Hall, prospective students and their parents could relax in a modern languages-based 'Euro Café'.⁴⁹

Thus can be seen the high profile afforded to activities which were explicitly feminised, most of which were extra-curricular activities rather than part of the taught curriculum. This has clear similarities with Ball and Gewirtz's (1997) findings at 'Pankhurst', a maintained sector, all-girls' school with a largely middle class intake, where it was found that at Open Days, a high profile was given to more 'feminised' areas, such as languages, art and music. The authors considered that there was also a classed element

⁴⁸ Both of these young women took part in my small group interviews.

⁴⁹ A timetable of the Open Evening activities and events is reproduced as Appendix 11.

to this: ‘the high profile given to these ‘feminised’ curriculum areas contributes to niche marketing and articulates a commitment to a particular, classed version of femininity’ (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997:213).

Indeed, the classed element of the foregrounding of these areas could be seen clearly at Midham. Activities such as horse riding, skiing and playing a musical instrument set middle class young women apart from their peers and denoted them as middle class, which must in part be due to the fact that these are, on the whole, expensive pursuits. The parents’ economic capital, in paying to send their daughter to Midham, is thus exchanged for cultural capital (Ball *et al.*, 1997), through the availability of opportunities for her to take part in activities which deliver a particular kind of classed femininity. Participating in these activities would contribute to the young women’s gendered and classed socialisation (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997), and would identify them as *bona fide* members of the middle class.

The promotion of extra-curricular activities is accordingly seen to be an important aspect in school marketing at Midham, and these activities tend to be specifically gendered and classed. Middle class families place a high value on extra-curricular activities, affording them an important role in their construction and reproduction of themselves and their children as middle class, and this starts from when the children are very young (Ball and Vincent, 2005). Such activities can therefore be seen as appealing to these families, and consequently as an important aspect for school marketing in the independent sector.

For middle class young women, it would appear that gaining certain ‘accomplishments’ remains as significant today as in Victorian times.

although the reasons for their importance have now changed. Rather than preparing them for marriage and a leisured life, these activities are now part of a general ‘making up’ of the middle class child (Ball and Vincent, 2005), and can also be seen to be a part of a strategy for planning for the child’s future, exercised by many middle class families (Ball, 2003). Their significance and value for parents selecting a school for a daughter who is less academic, which was an important aspect in Victorian times (Delamont, 1989; Coffey and Delamont, 2001) can be seen to have remained the case today at Midham, a non-selective school where not all of the students were particularly academically-minded. Activities such as music, drama and dance add value to the young woman, through the addition of cultural capital, which can make up for a lack of educational capital for certain young women from middle class families (Moi, 1999). This is a point that was reiterated by one of the Midham students, Lauren. She had considered leaving the school after taking her GCSEs, and moving to a local Grammar School, but had decided against this, a decision she attributed partially to the possibility of becoming involved in a range of extra-curricular activities at Midham. Although she felt that the educational level of Midham was not as high as the other school she had been considering, Midham made up for this through its strength in extra-curricular activities, and she had made the most of these during her time there:

Lauren: I do think that [Midham] prides itself very well on extra-curricular activities, on sport, drama [...] I think that academic-wise, it's not the greatest school in the world but

extra-curricular activities, it does have a wide range of things to do.

The gaining of these ‘accomplishments’ can be equally, if not more beneficial for families whose roots are not in the middle class, in their quest to become and remain in this social class location, a point to which I will return in chapter 6. Clearly, there is more than one route to a middle-class future. Education provides one way in which one might maintain or gain a position within the middle-classes. If one is from a middle-class background, but is not academically high achieving, this could be potentially problematic, particularly for those who have more recent connections to the middle-class. However, if one has middle-class cultural and social capital, then one’s position can therefore be retained, with less educational capital (Moi, 1999). This can be enhanced through the school as well as the home. Thus contrary to Lee and Marks’ (1992) argument that independent schools with a traditional ethos are not desirable for parents who wish to provide opportunities for their daughters to progress, it would seem in the case of Midham that traditional aspects of its ethos can provide opportunity structures, something which Lee and Marks attribute only to non-traditional schools. Whilst there have been changes with respect to some activities (young women participate in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, rather than sewing) the overall ethos based around the importance of gaining ‘accomplishments’ remains.

Discourses of Support and Discourses of Dependency

As has been touched on in previous sections, Midham School's ethos was integrally based around a discourse of support for all members of the school community, in both an academic and pastoral sense. This section will consider further the supportive ethos of the school, revealing it to be significant in the marketing of the school and positively perceived by many of the students, but also potentially problematic in its reinforcement of academic dependency and 'spoonfeeding'. Such discourses can be used to highlight the tension between liberal feminism and more traditional forms of femininity within the school. Supportive discourses can be considered to arise out of an 'ethic of care' position (Strachan, 1999), which is integral to certain female managers' leadership, including some female leaders in education such as female Heads and teachers. Strachan (1999) notes that from a feminist perspective, it may be considered that the creation of a supportive atmosphere with a sense of community and belonging brings about the removal of oppression, in this way drawing on Beck's (1992) assertion that caring helps to address the needs that arise from oppression and repression. However, Strachan considers that the adoption of an 'ethic of care' position can be problematic on account of its reinforcement of the gender binary, with caring roles taken up on the whole by women. In a similar connection, Lee *et al.*, (1994) in a comparative study of several independent schools in the USA, noted that in some girls' schools, discourses were not merely of support, but led to the reinforcement of academic dependence. The authors found that these discourses of

dependency were not present in boys' or co-educational independent schools, but tended to be found in girls' independent schools, particularly those that were not academically selective. Lee *et al.* (*ibid*) perceived these discourses to be highly problematic in terms of notions surrounding equal opportunities and academic progression for female students educated in these establishments.

At Midham, discourses of support were drawn on heavily in the marketing of the school. The school website, for instance, stressed the 'supportive family environment' of the school, with its 'continuity of care from 3-18'. In another section, on class sizes, it was further emphasised that 'the group sizes are significantly smaller than in school in the maintained sector and this helps to foster the caring, family atmosphere that is such a hallmark of the school'. Furthermore, in the prospectus, a double page spread was devoted to 'Caring for the Individual', with emphasis in the text on the school's supportive pastoral system, and on awareness of the differing learning and support needs of students, whether they had a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, or were Gifted and Talented.

Moreover, the school's caring and supportive atmosphere was something that the marketing coordinator, Linda Johnson, believed was particularly attractive to parents and prospective students. She felt that this ethos set Midham apart from its competitors where the emphasis was laid more on academic results, and which she believed to have a more pressured atmosphere. In my interview with her, she drew comparison between the atmosphere at Midham, and Princess Alice High School, which she referred to as 'our nearest rival'. She referred to Princess Alice High as 'historically

very high achieving' but felt that there was 'more of a pressure-cooker atmosphere there'. Moreover, she felt that the more pressurised atmosphere at Princess Alice High meant that there was 'perhaps less concentration on other aspects of education, which we think is more important'. Aware that parents and their daughters were likely to be considering both schools, she tended to emphasise this aspect when discussing the school at marketing events such as Open Days:

Linda: I always say to parents, if you come in, just feel the atmosphere, [...] do you think your daughter would be happy here? What are her feelings about it, does she feel that it's a friendly, supportive school? Because that's what counts, ultimately.

Linda further considered that parents needed to think about where their daughter's strengths and weaknesses lay, and whether she desired and could cope with a pressured atmosphere, when making this decision. She had made a decision on this basis for her own daughter (who was now 21), who had attended Midham but had also looked round Princess Alice High at the age of eleven. They had been put off Princess Alice High by the thought that she would be 'pressured' there, so had opted for Midham, where she had been very comfortable, achieved top grades and, after leaving, had attended a high status pre-1992 university.

The majority of the young women whom I interviewed at Midham perceived the school's friendly and supportive atmosphere as a positive

aspect of their school lives. Indeed, several of the young women whom I interviewed believed that the relaxed, supportive atmosphere had helped them to achieve well. For instance, Kerry and Eleanor, two friends from the Upper Sixth, had found the atmosphere in the Sixth Form to be relaxed, but felt that this had led them to become self-motivated with their work, something that they believed would be beneficial to them when they went to university. They felt that the school was encouraging rather than pushy, and Eleanor contrasted this with the experiences of friends who attended other independent schools: ‘they [Midham] like to give the all-round education [...] they’re not just geared towards getting the grades, they really are there for the student, not just for the statistics’.

Furthermore, Jenny and Jane, who were both in the Lower Sixth at the time of interview, had also found the ethos of the school to be supportive:

Helen: *What is the ethos of Midham School like? What do you think it is?*

Jenny: *Caring for the individual, kind of making sure that you can achieve your potential, just very caring.*

Jane: *And it cares for the all-round individual, rather than pushing for academic success, they’ll push you in a sporting area, or in art or drama or whatever you’re particularly*

good at, which is great, because so many other schools are very much...

Jenny: Just exam factories [Jane nods in agreement].

Similarly, Victoria, from the Upper Sixth, had found the atmosphere at Midham to be supportive and encouraging rather than pressurised, stating that:

Victoria: I don't think there's like a pressured atmosphere [...]... I don't think there's a focus on grades, I think it's sort of a focus on achieving your personal full potential, which I feel is less pressurised [...]

Likewise, Hayley, a Lower Sixth student, felt that the atmosphere at Midham was less pressurised than at other independent schools, and this enabled students such as herself to develop a more rounded personality and outlook:

Hayley: compared to some other schools, I think, which are a lot more academic than [Midham] is, I think that the people that come out of [Midham] are usually down-to-earth, non-materialistic people that you can have a genuine conversation with, rather than pen on paper.

Again, the school ethos of caring for and developing the all round individual was conveyed here, and furthermore, students contrasted this with other schools' perceived 'pushiness' and focus on the academic, which they perceived as detrimental. It can be seen, then, that these, and other students, had found the caring, supportive atmosphere of the school to be a positive thing.

Thus the traditional feminine ethos of care, support and protectiveness espoused at Midham can be regarded as holding considerable appeal to certain young women and their families. This may be contrasted with the more academic, competitive 'pushiness' that both the students and the school's marketing coordinator considered to characterise other independent schools for girls (such as Princess Alice High), which is more characteristic of a liberal feminist ethos. Indeed, the differences which were highlighted between Midham School and Princess Alice High ostensibly relate back to the origins of the two schools. Princess Alice High was a school which followed the 'High School' tradition, originally based on academic rigour and the potential for girls to achieve in all academic fields, with particular emphasis on those fields traditionally dominated by men, such as Mathematics. By contrast, as has already been mentioned, Midham was originally a small boarding institution, following more of a 'finishing school' tradition based on the acquisition of feminine accomplishments. Although, as has been shown earlier in the chapter, Midham had adopted many of the facets of liberal feminism, this can be seen here to be an ameliorated version of liberalism, with a continued tension between a traditional femininity based on supportiveness and pastoral care, and a more

liberal feminist ethos, which, whilst it can be seen to hold a considerable degree of marketing appeal for parents (Lee and Marks, 1992; Jackson and Bisset, 2005; Ball and Gewirtz, 1997) may be considered to lead to a more pressurised atmosphere. With respect to the marketing of the school, this may be perceived as less appealing to Midham's parents and their (frequently less academically able) daughters.

However, a danger also lay in this supportive, family-like atmosphere, in that it could lead to a form of academic dependency which, whilst holding some advantages for the students when they were in the school, could potentially lead to problems on leaving school (Lee *et al.*, 1994). Notions of dependency were occasionally raised at Midham, and this was certainly an issue that arose in some instances from its discourse of supportiveness. This issue came up in an informal discussion with Elaine Yates, a teacher of Home Economics who had recently moved to Midham after previously working in a local maintained sector Sixth Form college. She told me that when she had arrived at Midham, she had been surprised to find that the students had much more of an expectation to be 'spoon-fed' answers to questions, and given sheets of written notes, rather than having the ability to go out and do their own research and reading on topics. This was something which she felt that students at Sixth Form level should be capable of doing.

Indeed, contrary to such expectations, some of the students at Midham appeared to expect this type of 'spoon-feeding' in their lessons. For instance, Charlotte, a Lower Sixth student, had found certain aspects of her AS level History course difficult, commenting that:

Charlotte: in History, one of our teachers writes loads of notes for us, which is good, because I prefer that [...] but the other teacher just talks, and she expects us to take notes [...] I just feel that they've given me too much independence...

Although Charlotte clearly preferred what she saw as a more supportive teaching style, the second teacher was arguably giving the students more effective preparation for life after Midham than the first, whose strategy of giving out written notes encouraged the students to behave in an academically dependent manner rather than being selective and thinking for themselves. However, this did not go unnoticed by the students, some of whom, in fact, identified issues of academic dependency and ‘spoon-feeding’ within the school, and expressed concerns regarding what consequences this would have for them when they moved on to university and work. Harriet, Victoria and Jessica, who were in the Upper Sixth at the time of my interview with them in February 2005, raised such concerns whilst reflecting back on their time at Midham. Whilst all three of these young women had enjoyed their time at the school, and felt that it had provided them with the opportunity to gain good grades, as they neared the end of their time at the school they were worried about how they would adjust to life at university, which they considered would be very different to their lives at school.

Harriet, who had moved to Midham in Year 10 (aged 14) because her father had to move into the area on account of his work, had formerly

attended a co-educational comprehensive school in the South of England. Although she told me that she had not particularly enjoyed her time at her comprehensive school, she had found that it was ‘a bit more real’. She contrasted this to Midham, which she perceived as ‘a bit sheltered’. Jessica, on the other hand, had been educated in a small independent junior school, and Victoria had attended a village primary school, prior to their moving to Midham at the age of eleven. Both of these young women felt that the protected and nurturing environment at Midham had enabled them to perform well academically and to develop socially, with Victoria commenting that ‘I don’t think I could handle a big state school’ and Jessica saying that ‘I don’t think I would have got on very well at something that was hugely different to [Midham]’.

However, much as the school had provided them with advantages in this way, these students could see that this was also a source of potential disadvantage. All three of these young women had become somewhat concerned about how they would adjust to university life. For instance, Harriet mentioned that she was feeling ‘actually quite scared about going back out into the real world, which is what I feel I will be doing now, because it’s so sheltered here’, describing their lives at the school as ‘spoon-fed’, and Jessica also raised concerns about moving out of the ‘protected’ environment of Midham. It can therefore be seen that whilst discourses inherent within the school of protectiveness and security may be useful while students are in the school, they may be less helpful, or even a source of anxiety and possible hindrance, in their future lives.

Such discourses had further been picked up by the Careers teacher, Kathryn Williams. In a Lower Sixth Careers lesson that took place at the beginning of the Summer Term in 2005, she suggested to students that when considering a university, they may wish to think about applying to a small university or college, as this may have a similar environment to the small, friendly and supportive school in which they were currently being educated. This clearly gendered discourse draws a problematic connection between these young women and the idea of opting for a small, safe environment, which would further delay their entry into ‘the real world’ (as Harriet called it).

Thus, it can be seen that, whilst the safety, security and homely atmosphere of Midham may have been positive for students whilst they were in the school, the ‘real world’ looked very different, and it was questionable whether their education would provide an adequate preparation for this. Whilst some parents, in choosing schools for their daughters, desire a safe, traditional, secure atmosphere (Lee and Marks, 1992; Watson, 1997) this may ultimately not be conducive to them being adequately equipped for their futures. The caring and supportive ‘ethic of care’ (Strachan, 1999) position adopted at the school emphasises that ‘pushy’, aggressive and masculinised behaviour is ‘not like us’ and gentle, caring, feminine behaviour is ‘like us’. This ethos can therefore be seen to be linked more profoundly to traditional versions of femininity rather than more liberal discourses of equality.

It may in fact be the case that what was seen to be enabling within the school environment became constraining once students come to leave.

This could act against the positive aspects of equality of opportunity between the sexes, drawn from liberal feminism, which have been considered to be a positive aspect of single sex independent schools (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997; Lee and Marks, 1992; Watson, 1997; Proweller, 1997).

Care thus needs to be taken to ensure that repressive discourses do not occur, if the intention is to ensure equality of opportunity rather than traditional feminine roles based on (and leading to) dependency.

The supportive ethos present at Midham had the potential to advantage the young women, and thus could be perceived as having a liberating rather than stifling effect. Although academically selective single sex independent schools have been seen as having the potential to enhance gender equality (Lee and Marks, 1992) schools such as Midham, which are not ‘pushy’ in the academic sense but lay a stronger emphasis on social aspects, clearly still have a place for certain groups of young women. This was particularly significant for those from middle class backgrounds who were not high academic achievers. In the case of Midham, the small class sizes resulting in more individualised attention, and their extensive focus on networks of support and guidance meant that such students were able to obtain satisfactory grades at A2 Level. In this sense they were well equipped for going to university, and the likelihood of a continued middle class future. However, it is questionable whether they were prepared adequately in relation to being able to study independently, and being able to ‘cope’ in a larger educational setting; worries which were raised by both teachers and students and which were highlighted earlier in this section. Although Midham provided them with an opportunity for academic success,

enabling them to become and remain members of the middle class through their educational achievements and their associated possibilities, its atmosphere and ethos also led to certain limitations which were potentially problematic.

Conclusion

Midham School held a unique position in the local education market. Providing an education for young women with diverse abilities, the school offered opportunities to excel in different areas, both academic and extra-curricular. Encouragement was given to students to succeed in all areas, and the majority of students enthusiastically made use of all available opportunities.

Whilst few students went on to study in stereotypically masculine fields, those who did wish to do this were supported and encouraged by the school. However, whilst the school had taken up discourses of liberal feminism based around equality of opportunity and the possibility of success in all curriculum areas, this was a relatively ameliorated form of liberalism, which tended to be subsumed by discourses relating to a more traditional form of middle class femininity based round participation in particular kinds of extra-curricular activity. On the positive side, these extra-curricular activities provided diverse opportunities for all students, and these reinforced and added middle class cultural capital. Moreover, whilst the focus on extra-curricular activities may have reflected a more traditional feminine ethos, not all of the activities were traditional: whilst some

activities, such as ballet and music, had a traditional feel, others, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, were more modern in their nature. Furthermore, in a school such as Midham, where not all students were highly academically able, these activities and their integral nature to school life were highly significant, providing a structure of opportunity and progression which did not rely solely on academic achievement. Moreover, support networks were extensive, with the friendly and comfortable atmosphere valued by most of the students. However, whilst this support and strong emphasis on pastoral care was perceived positively by many of the students, and also used as a key marketing point by the school, it was not without its problems. Indeed, it could be seen to lead to a culture of 'spoonfeeding', which was identified by both teachers and students, and might be considered to have a potentially negative effect when the young women left the school.

In sum, this chapter has related various discourses that were present within the school that related to gender. The school can be seen to be caught between two discourses, one of liberal feminism linked to equal opportunities, and the other of traditionalism, linked to discourses of the 'ethic of care'. Both of these were highly influential in the development of the school's students into middle class young women. However, it can further be seen that social class was an integral factor within discussion of the gendered discourses. To this end, it is to the young women's development, reproduction and self-creation into classed individuals that I now turn.

Chapter 5: Educational Decision-Making and the Established Middle

Class

Introduction

The previous two chapters have focussed largely on Midham School as a primary site for the conveyance and inculcation of particular kinds of classed and gendered discourses. However, the school was not the only location in which such influential discourses occurred for these young women: the family and home also contributed to the conveyance of a variety of explicit and tacit messages relating to education and decision-making. This had a considerable impact on my respondents' educational pathways and the decisions that they made in relation to their education and future careers.

In Chapter 1, I drew attention to the problematic homogenisation of middle class young people and their families in some of the currently available literature concerning educational decision-making. There, I argued that the idea of a simple distinction between the working class and middle class may now be regarded as manifestly outdated. Social class can, and should, no longer be presented as a simple bifurcation between these two groups, but, rather, it is necessary to acknowledge that multiple distinctions occur within social classes as well as between them, with the middle class being considered as a diverse category in itself (Savage, 1995; Crompton, 1992; Devine, 2004). Viewing these distinctions on a school level is also inappropriate, as it is not the case that each school is inhabited

by one distinctive group with clearly identifiable and common characteristics, as would seem to be the case when looking at some comparative studies of educational decision-making (see Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Indeed, Proweller (1997) raises the point that independent schools are increasingly utilised by students from a more diverse range of backgrounds, which she sees as a consequence of these schools recruiting more widely on account of economic change and a decreasing group of 'traditional' independent school-using families. Such arguments will be briefly reconsidered at the start of this chapter. Following on from this I will highlight the presence of considerable intra-class distinction within Midham School itself. Two main groups could be identified within the school. The first was an established middle class group, whose backgrounds and origins were in the middle class; with parents and other family members having themselves attended independent schools and, frequently, university. The second group, which I refer to as the 'liminal' middle class, had far less extensive histories of middle classness, and their families often had working-class origins. In turn, this led to the occurrence of specific discourses within these families, which affected how the young women who emanated from them went about making their education-related decisions. It is to the former group that the chapter then turns, with the latter group being the subject of the following chapter.

The young women at Midham who came from the established middle class group will be shown to come from families where the use of independent schooling, and a subsequent transition to university, were expected, with such 'decisions' seeming so natural to them as to be non-

decisions. Further to this, the security of these young women's middle class futures led to the possibility of making decisions based on enjoyment and leisure-based factors, with the selection of a high status university or course as less significant in maintaining their social class location (Moi, 1999). A final connected point is that, however extensive the family's reserve of cultural and social capital may be, a place at a top university cannot be attained unless one has the academic ability to meet the required grades for entry. Thus the assumption in much of the currently available literature in this area (see, for example, Fox, 1985; Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) that young people from independent schools will automatically progress on to a high status university, is refuted.

Class as Fragmentary, but Still Present

It is undeniable that social class remains highly significant in educational decision-making and transitions. Those from middle class backgrounds, and especially those who attend independent schools, have been described as having an automatic and comfortable transition through education, from compulsory schooling, to studying academic options (AS and A2 levels) in the Sixth Form, to university and then on to a professional career (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Power *et al.*, 2005). A relationship has been identified between class background and academic attainment (Heath and Clifford, 1996; Tinklin, 2003), with those from middle class backgrounds tending to outperform those from working class backgrounds. The interplay of class and gender is further significant here:

gender differences in the subjects chosen for study at post-compulsory levels have been seen to be considerably narrower where students have greater material and cultural advantages (Arnot *et al.*, 1999), a point that was discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter.

Studies of students educated in independent schools tend to draw heavily on accounts of social advantage, and its potential translation into academic advantage (Ball *et al.*, 1997). Such advantages are perceived to be inculcated into students throughout their educational careers, both from their school (institutional habitus) and their home and family (familial habitus). Drawing upon Bourdieusian concepts, Ball *et al.* (2002) describe the progress of young people from independent schools through the field of education as ‘moving through their world as fish through water’. These young people’s possession of appropriate dispositions (habitus) and cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1997) is considered to lead to highly successful academic progressions, with a place at a top university an almost guaranteed outcome (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Such dispositions of advantage and expectation are conveyed to them explicitly and tacitly from parents and other family members within the home, which become imbued in their subconscious and have a profound influence on the educational decisions they make. Linkage has been further shown between attendance at an independent school, gaining a place at a prestigious university, and progressing on to a high earning professional career (Power, 2001; Power *et al.*, 2005, 2006). Further to this, reference has been made to the similarity of middle class trajectories through education, with Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001) and Lucey (2001) highlighting the striking similarity between middle

class girls' trajectories. However, somewhat alarmingly, the aforementioned authors also refer to middle class young women's progress through education as 'like a conveyor belt', thus using their perception of similarity between these progressions as a reason to ignore the distinctions between them. Lucey (2001) further uses these ideas of similarity between educational pathways for middle class young women to refute theories of individualism (such as Beck, 1992) which propose that educational experiences can no longer be understood in terms of class-based distinctions.

Whilst Lucey's assertion that class-based distinctions in educational performance and destinations remain highly significant is undoubtedly the case, it is also important to recognise differences between young people, and how these may affect the decisions that they make in relation to their education, training and future careers. These differences have, unfortunately, been neglected in relation to the middle class in studies of educational decision-making. The middle class have been portrayed as a homogenous whole, making decisions in a selfish and calculated manner in order to advantage themselves (and thus disadvantage others) (Power, 2001). Rather than considering them as individuals, middle class people are presented with a 'thinly disguised hostility' (Power, 2001: 203) as a homogenised, dislikeable whole, only visible in contrast to a valorised working class. With the majority of writers in the field of education and social class coming from working class backgrounds themselves (Reay, 1998b), useful and interesting studies have been carried out which focus on

the working class and the distinctions present within it, but little has been written about distinctions within the middle class.

Further to this, New Class Theorists have raised the idea of social class as more fragmentary rather than homogenous. Whilst some have viewed class as a more individualised form of hierarchical distinction (Bottero, 2004), others have identified the existence of fragments within the middle class, with distinction on the grounds of, for instance, one's history of middle classness, and family educational background (Devine, 2004; Crompton, 1992). More recent studies of educational decision-making have purported to draw upon intra-class differences within the middle class (see, for example, Ball *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2005): however, the distinction which is drawn here is between those middle class young people who attend independent schools, and those who attend schools and colleges in the maintained sector. The school attended is taken as a proxy for social class background, without consideration that young people within individual schools may differ markedly in terms of their parental background in education, and what this means for their own orientation towards education. This neglect of consideration of differentiation between students, and the presentation of groups of students as homogeneous, is inherently problematic. Further to this, studies of the independent sector have highlighted differences between families who choose to use independent education for their children in relation to their family educational backgrounds and family histories of using independent schools (Connell *et al.*, 1982; Gorard, 1997; Johnson, 1987; Jordan *et al.*, 1994; Devine, 2004).

with an increasingly diverse range of families utilising the independent sector (Proweller, 1997).

However, many of the currently-available studies have focussed on parental decision-making, rather than relating these factors to decisions made by the young people themselves. By carrying out a study focussing closely on an individual school, the possibility presents itself to analyse in detail the differences between young people's decision-making within that school, and how this was affected by factors within their background. This is what I have attempted to do at Midham, and the results of this are presented in the current chapter and the subsequent one. Each individual student's home background, and the discourses inherent within it, had a profound affect on the decisions that she made and perceived as possibilities. Whilst largely leading to the same result (going to university), there was considerable variance between students in terms of their decision-making in relation to which university and subject. Furthermore, differences were also apparent in relation to the people from whom students received help in the decision-making process, and what type of help they received.

Whilst each individual student made decisions in a different way, it was possible to identify two main groups of students within the school, in accordance with their own and their family's historical relationship with the middle class. Drawing on data from my in-depth interviews with the young women, I was able to ascertain certain shared characteristics of each group, which I have identified here by the names of 'established middle class' (so called because of their long history and relationship to the middle class) and

'liminal middle class' (so called on account of their transitional position and less extensive links to the middle class).⁵⁰ Each of the identified groups had certain shared characteristics, leading to their own distinctive ways of making their decisions.

Unlike Delamont's (1984; 1989) and Connell *et al.*'s (1982) studies, where students tended to be friends with others from similar social backgrounds to themselves, the two groups which I identified at Midham were not necessarily friendship groups, with friendships often crossing the boundaries between groups. Rather, these groups are identified and linked by their shared history of middle-class-ness, family educational background and experiences, and the discourses which arose out of these and contributed to the decisions that were made by these young women (and their parents) throughout their educational careers.

Below is presented a table, identifying which of the students whom I interviewed belonged to each of the groups:

Table 5.1: Class Origins of Respondents

Established Middle Class	Liminal Middle Class
Lauren	Isabel
Jane	Olivia
Rebecca	Louise
Beth	Gemma
Lucy	Kerry
Allie	Eleanor
Suzanne	Hayley

⁵⁰ The concept of liminality is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Harriet	Jenny
Jessica	Rachael
	Nicole
	Joanna
	Charlotte
	Victoria

Although such distinctions between groups are useful for purposes of analysis, it is crucial to avoid this categorisation of students becoming overly reified. Students had much in common with the others with whom I have grouped them here, but this does not mean that all of the students in each category had identical life experiences. Furthermore, significant distinctions between individual students within each group could be identified, for example, on the grounds of academic ability. Thus, the limitations of such categorisation are recognised. It is the significant similarities between students which will be dealt with here, and how these led to similarities of outcome. However, it is important to note that each individual student experienced different discourses from her home and family, and interpreted the discourses arising from the school in a different way. These distinctions are drawn to illustrate a clear lack of homogeneity between the young women as a whole.

The established middle class at Midham could in some ways be likened to Delamont's (1984a, 1989) 'debs and dollies' in terms of their family history and educational background, with mothers who tended either not to work or to work (often part-time) in feminised occupations, and fathers who owned their own businesses. They had a tendency to be the students who were the most expensively dressed and fashionable. They had

multiple connections within the independent sector, with considerable family histories of attending independent schools, and in several cases, family members who currently attended other schools within the sector (Connell *et al.*, 1982). Furthermore, they had family histories of attending university, particularly in the case of their fathers. As such, they tended to take for granted their path through the education system, with the tacit assumption that they would progress in a particular manner, that is, successfully moving on to university and then a professional career (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

The liminal middle class, by contrast (who will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter) were on the whole the first generation of their families to attend independent schools, and would be the first to go to university. Consequently, they had few connections with either sector. These young women were ‘class travellers’ (Reay, 1997, 1998b), who depended on credentials bestowed upon them by the educational system itself to maintain their position as members of the middle class (Allatt, 1993; Proweller, 1997; Power, 2001). Whilst in their attitudes to work and their aspirations, they were similar to Delamont’s ‘swots and weeds’ / intelligentsia, their parents’ educational background meant that they could give them little help or guidance in their decisions except for the more emotive forms of help (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Brooks, 2003, 2004, 2005). Money was a significant concern for these young women, who did not take their place in an independent school, or indeed in the middle class as a whole for granted (Delamont, 1989), seeing it as a position they had to strive to maintain.

Thus, whilst rather different from the elite students of Delamont's study, the two groups of students identified in my study can be seen as representing the different ways in which different class fractions used the school. Whilst the Established Middle Class used it to confirm and solidify their secure class position, the Liminal Middle Class used it to maintain what was, for them, a less secure hold on a middle class social location. These two groups, their backgrounds, and the discourses that impinge on the decisions they made are now discussed in greater depth in this and the following chapter.

The Automatic Assumption of Independent Schooling

Similarly to those from social elite backgrounds in Delamont's study (1989), for the young women at Midham who came from established middle class backgrounds, the actuality that they would be educated at an independent school had seemingly been an unquestionable and automatic assumption throughout their lives. In the majority of cases, they either had attended Midham for the whole of their school lives, or had moved to the school at the age of eleven after prior attendance at an independent preparatory school.

This (non-) decision on the sector of schooling to be utilised may have had its roots in the educational background of the young women's families, and their long histories and substantial evidence of using the independent sector. Several of the young women referred to their siblings attending independent schools. In many cases, the young women's parents,

particularly their fathers, had attended independent schools themselves. For instance, Suzanne, whose father ran his own successful business, had a sister who attended a highly prestigious boarding school for girls. Her father had also attended an independent school, as had her mother, who was herself the daughter of a businessman. West (1992) highlighted this notion of ‘sector loyalty’ from those choosing the independent sector of education as a family tradition, and this could further be highlighted as a site of cultural and social reproduction, with parents reproducing their own privileged educational careers with their own children. However, this is not a ubiquitous phenomenon, with many parents who use the independent sector of education having themselves been educated in the maintained sector (West, 1992; Gorard, 1997). This is, however, a key factor in differentiating these young women from their classmates from newer fractions of the middle class, who were often the first in their families to attend independent schools.

Indeed, in the cases of all of the young women belonging to established fractions of the middle class, the only schools that they and their parents had considered were in the independent sector, indicating a strong link to a decidedly upper-middle class ‘circuit of schooling’ (Ball *et al.*, 1997). In earlier studies (such as Gorard, 1997; Ball *et al.*, 1997; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), middle class parents are shown as discerning between a wide range of schools, including high-performing state schools as well as the independent sector. However, my research at Midham would seem to indicate further the presence of a highly privileged group for whom the maintained sector of education is never under consideration, because it is as

if it does not exist. Indeed it does not exist in the experiences of these families, with neither parents nor their offspring having experienced education in the maintained sector.

This can be illustrated using examples from the young women I interviewed at Midham. Jane, from the Lower Sixth, had entered the school at the age of eleven, and said that her parents had suggested a range of schools, which they had considered together and she had had considerable input into the final decision. This is similar to Gorard's (1996, 1997) notion of 'choice sets', where parents choosing schools for their children allow them to make the final decision, but this is from a set which they have pre-selected as suitable: in the case of these young women, consisting entirely of independent schools. Similarly, Allie, an Upper Sixth student, told me that when choosing a school for her to move to at the age of eleven, her parents had picked a 'shortlist' of independent schools, which had consisted of Midham, Princess Alice High School and Fawley, a co-educational boarding school. They had visited all three schools as a family, and Allie herself had been allowed to make the final decision between them, choosing Midham as she had preferred its comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

Allie was, in fact, the only one of the established middle class students who referred specifically to her parents wanting her to go to an independent school. All of the other students in this group, when asked about their choosing to go to Midham, had either only considered going to Midham or in the case of those who listed several schools that had been under consideration, merely listed several schools from the independent sector. They did not mention that the schools that they and their families

had considered were all independent schools: for them, the terms ‘school’ and ‘independent school’ were indicatively synonymous. Family discourses around education clearly centred on the independent sector, with little or no family experience of other sectors, leading to maintained schools not even being discussed. Consequently, independent schools became discursively constructed as the only schools to be considered, with the absence of maintained schools from these familial discourses constructing them as invisible.

Moreover, familiarity with specific schools from the independent sector was apparent, with the names of these schools clearly part of everyday parlance for these young women. Similar to the most privileged students in Connell et al.’s study (1982), these young women were familiar with the other independent schools in the area, and were acquainted with students from these schools within their family or wider social circle. In my interviews with the young women at Midham who came from more established middle class backgrounds, they frequently used abbreviated forms of the schools’ names (‘Princess Alice’, ‘Stratton Girls’ ‘Oakley Boys’) indicating their familiarity and comfortable usage of this vocabulary and discussion of this subject area. Indeed, they further assumed familiarity on the part of others (myself, and their friends) with schools from this sector, and thus tended to mention names of schools in their interviews without any elaboration on what type of school this was. This did lead to some confusion in one interview, when Jessica, an upper Sixth student whose family experience of the independent education sector and of university rendered her background decidedly in the established middle

class, was recounting that she had considered moving at the age of sixteen to a boys' independent school which had a co-educational Sixth Form. Her friend Victoria, who did not have such extensive reserves of background knowledge about the independent education sector, was extremely puzzled as to why Jessica would want to move to what she thought was a boys' school (particularly as Jessica had referred to the school as 'Oakley Boys'). This confusion on the part of her friend prompted Jessica to explain the situation of the co-educational Sixth Form. Such occurrences illustrate profoundly the distinct differences in familiarity with the independent sector between young women within the school.

Post-Compulsory Decisions – Sticking with the Familiar

At post-compulsory level, the strong association between these young women and their families, and the independent sector, remained. Rates of staying on in education after the end of compulsory schooling at the age of sixteen in independent schools are high, but for the young women in my study, this did not mean that continuation into the Sixth Form at Midham was the only option they considered. Indeed, 50% of respondents to my questionnaire said that they had considered moving to another school or college, and 24 out of 70 students who would have been in the Upper Fifth (Year 11) in July 2004 (and who were in the Lower Sixth, at the time of my research) had left the school at this stage. Those who had thought about leaving had looked at a wide range of options, with questionnaire respondents noting that they had considered other independent schools.

schools in the maintained sector, and both A Levels and vocational courses at local colleges. However, those students from established middle class backgrounds, unlike their liminal middle class peers, had only considered other independent schools (particularly co-educational or boarding schools), and in a small number of cases, high-ranking grammar schools.

Students who had considered changing educational establishments at this stage had done this for a variety of reasons. Both Allie and Suzanne had considered moving to boarding schools for the Sixth Form: Allie to a co-educational Sixth Form in a boys' boarding school, which had been previously attended by her father, and Suzanne to the prestigious girls' school that her sister attended. Both of these students said that they had thought that moving to boarding school would be a useful 'halfway house' (Suzanne) between day school and university. Furthermore, both of these young women's fathers (who had attended boarding schools themselves) had encouraged them to consider boarding school and to submit applications, whereas their mothers (who had attended day schools) had not been so enthusiastic for them to apply. However, finally, both of these young women had decided to stay at Midham, but for different reasons. Allie had taken the entrance examination but failed to gain a place at the school which she had wanted to go to, so had decided to stay at Midham. Suzanne had grown increasingly concerned about moving into a new environment, and getting to know new teachers and make new friends, particularly at a time when she perceived that her academic work was particularly important. She had been further encouraged to stay at Midham

by her mother, who had recently become divorced from Suzanne's father and had been keen for her daughter to remain living at home with her.

It is important to note here that for young women from elite, established middle class backgrounds, they and their parents could make decisions on their Sixth Form education without extensive consideration of monetary factors. They knew that continuing in independent education was something that they could afford, and were secure in the knowledge that their usage of this sector would continue. In the aforementioned examples of Allie and Suzanne, both of these young women's fathers were keen for them to go to boarding school, and had been happy to finance this. The possibility of making decisions of this type was only available to those who were very comfortably secure in their financial position, as with average Sixth Form boarding fees of £6,690 per term (ISC, 2007), the possibility of making this decision is available to only a small number of families. The fact that they could progress in this way, and encompass these extremely exclusive and elite options within their 'choice sets' (Gorard, 1997) at this stage was a tacit and unquestionable assumption for these young women, with monetary issues and concerns a notably absent feature of their discourses. This is very different from the less secure transitions of the less-established, liminal middle class students who co-existed within the same school. An important distinction is thus drawn between different fractions of the middle class, and their portrayed homogeneity is disrupted by this.

The decision to remain at Midham can be seen in the cases of the aforementioned students to be connected to discourses of making one's mark, and securing for oneself a position in the social order of the school, as

well as bearing intrinsic relation to ability. This could be further seen in relation to Lauren, who was in the Lower Sixth at the time of interview. She was one of the higher-performing students at Midham, hoping to achieve A and B grades in her AS level examinations. She had contemplated moving at the age of sixteen to a local girls' grammar school, which was highly ranked in the county league tables. However, she had eventually decided against this, as, although she had felt that academically, her opportunities would be greater at the other school, she had very much wanted to become Head Girl⁵¹ or a House Captain at Midham, roles which would not have been available to her had she moved to another school. She also felt that her opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities (she was taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award) may have been curtailed had she moved to another school, surmising that 'academic-wise, [Midham] is not the greatest school in the world, but for extra-curricular activities, it does have a wide range of things to do'.

The decision-making at this stage for Lauren, as well as for Allie and Suzanne, can be seen to illustrate the inter-linkage between social class, ability and prestige within educational decision-making for these young women. For instance, in Lauren's case, choosing to move to a selective grammar school would have meant that her level of academic achievement, which was very high compared with many of her classmates at Midham, might have been perceived as rather more average. Consequently, by moving schools, this would have meant that she would not have had the

⁵¹ Towards the end of my time at Midham, I found out that Lauren had been elected as one of the two Head Girls for the following year. At the time of carrying out my research, the two Head Girls were Suzanne and Kerry.

same opportunities (i.e. to become Head Girl), and would have been less likely to have been perceived by her teachers and peers as a high flyer.

University as a Natural Progression

Similar to when they were making their decisions regarding choice of Sixth Form at the age of sixteen, the decisions made by these young women in relation to their leaving school at the age of eighteen were supported by the knowledge that they had substantial financial support available from their parents. This meant that they could have a confident and unproblematic attitude towards choosing universities (Hesketh, 1999; Ball *et al.*, 2002), with the possibility of moving away from their home town to attend a university some distance away being expected for most of these young women. Going to university was perceived as a natural progression (Pugsley, 2004), part of their expected biographies, which were inherently characterised by the presence of a wide range of available choice (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). However, cultural expectations of the progressions expected to be made by middle class young people led to the decisions which these young women perceived as available to them in fact being rather limited, consisting of a choice between different Higher Education institutions (which is also delimited by the student's desired course, and ability). Decision-making at this stage for this particular group of middle class students did not involve the consideration of whether or not to go to university.

In the case of the young women in my study from established middle class backgrounds, members of their families tended to have gone to university, and consequently, going to university was part of the normal discourse within their families. For instance, Rebecca, a student from the Lower Sixth, told me that whilst she had not (at the time of her interview, in February 2005) decided on a specific university or course of study, she had no doubt that she would go to university. Her parents and her older brother had all gone to university, and consequently, she perceived taking this step herself as ‘the done thing’ within her family. It was an unspoken fact that no other option was either expected or considered here: Rebecca’s ‘decision’ to go to university could, in fact, be described as a non-decision (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

Indeed, in the majority of cases when the student’s family had experience of university, there was an assumption that she would also follow that path. This had not been explicitly stated to the young women but it was, rather, a tacit assumption, conveyed through discourses inherent within the home and family. For instance, Lauren referred to her immediate and extended family as having all attended university, which she believed had contributed to her clear expectation that she too would follow this path:

Lauren: All my life, I've been brought up to believe that I'm going to university. Because my family, on the whole, not just my immediate but everyone else went to university, and that's the kind of way I've been brought up to believe.

Jane, too, felt that her parents and older siblings having gone to university had had a significant impact on her decision to do the same: ‘it made it... just what happens in our family, almost... it’s not an option to drop out at sixteen or eighteen’. Such ideas, whilst not being explicitly expressed or discussed openly within families, are part of everyday discourses, which become inculcated within the young women as part of their habitus, and lead to the young women themselves expecting that they will go to university.

When discussing the decision to go to university, some of my respondents considered what their parents’ reaction might have been, had they decided that they did not want to go to university. Allie indicated that both of her parents had been keen for her to go to university, but that her father had been particularly enthusiastic. She thought that if she had said that she did not want to go, this would have been problematic in the eyes of her father: ‘I think he’d have found that quite difficult, to begin with’. Similarly, Lauren spoke of her family’s expectations and hopes for her future, saying that ‘I think they’d be disappointed if I didn’t go to university’. However, not going to university is not something that many students from established middle class backgrounds tend to consider. Indeed, when everyone in the student’s immediate family and wider social circle had attended university, then for that student to make the decision not to go was not what ‘people like us’ do, and thus the possibility of this became almost inconceivable in the eyes of students or their parents. This discourse is all the more powerful because it is not expressed explicitly to the middle class young woman, but it is inherent, it has an ‘aspect of

invisibility [...] the power of the discourse lies in the silence that surrounds it' (Allatt, 1996). Rather, tacit messages that they were capable and that university would be a suitable and natural step in their progression to adulthood were conveyed to the young women from their homes and families (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Pugsley, 2004).

University Applications – Choice of Institution

The idea that these young women would go to university was inculcated in them throughout their lives, and this therefore became a natural progression for them to make. However, the young women at Midham, and particularly those from old-middle class backgrounds, tended to differ from those in previous studies (Power *et al.*, 2003; Brooks, 2003, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Sutton Trust, 2005) regarding the universities to which they were applying. It is in this way indicated that there are significant differences between those who attend different independent schools, with respect to the universities to which they apply (and where they are accepted). For instance, a national scale survey by the Sutton Trust (2005) found that young people from independent schools are more likely than their counterparts from maintained schools to go to university at the age of eighteen, with 92.2% of independent school leavers progressing in this way. The study additionally showed that the university to which an independent school leaver will go is much more likely to be an elite institution, with 25% of those leaving independent schools taking up places at the country's top 13 universities (Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, LSE,

UCL, York, Warwick, Bristol, Nottingham, St. Andrews, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Durham), compared to just under 1% from less affluent groups achieving similar A Level grades. Whilst this would seem to indicate the dominance of top institutions by groups attending independent schools, a far greater number (75%) of independent school leavers do not go to these universities. Certainly this was the case for the majority of students at Midham, where few students progress on to these universities. Further to this, although the aforementioned Sutton Trust report (2005) states that 4,600 of the 9,600 entrants to the top five universities in the country (Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, LSE and UCL, at the time when the study was carried out) have previously attended independent schools, this in fact only equates to 9% of the total number (42,000) of young people leaving independent schools at age eighteen.

In spite of this, available studies tend to cast far greater focus on those students who move on to these high status universities than those who do not. For instance, the study by Reay, David and Ball (Reay *et al.*, 2005; David *et al.*, 2003; Ball *et al.*, 2002) drew strong links between attendance at an independent school and gaining a place at a prestigious university. This was attributed to family influence, utilising the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1996) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to establish a conceptual framework whereby young people's university decision-making is considered to be strongly influenced by social capital (that they are capable of applying there and that this is a suitable destination for them) and cultural capital (knowledge of institutions and their entry requirements). This is transferred to them from family members who have themselves attended

these prestigious universities. The idea of these universities as realistic goals to aim for was part of these families' everyday discourse, with parents or other relatives who were alumni of these elite universities talking to the young people about their university choices, encouraging them to make applications and even taking them to look round their own 'alma mater'.

If university applications are seen in Gambetta's (1987: 187) terms as students 'jump[ing] as much as they could and as much as they perceived it was worth jumping', then elite institutions, for students from independent schools, are being rendered as a manageable 'jump' to make, through the passing on of social and cultural capital through the family. By contrast, the working class respondents in the study by Reay *et al.*, (2005, see also Ball *et al.*, 2002; David *et al.*, 2003) were disadvantaged, as even if they had high levels of attainment, their families had little or no experience of the Higher Education sector or of 'elite' institutions, and could give them little help with their applications.

However, this is necessarily a partial picture, and it must be borne in mind that the independent schools on which the aforementioned study focussed were highly prestigious and academically selective. Consequently, the destinations of its students are likely to be different from those of students from Midham, who in some cases had lower levels of academic attainment and were aiming for lower-ranking universities. Indeed, as a non-selective school, Midham educated students with a wide ability range, encompassing those students (such as Lauren, mentioned earlier in this chapter) who had been predicted three or four A and B grades at A2 level and who were hoping for a place at a top-ranking university, to those who

had been predicted two or three D or E grades and were aiming for a place on a course at a lower-ranking university. Thus the implication drawn by earlier studies (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) that the majority of students from independent schools move on to high ranking institutions and particularly Oxford and Cambridge is refuted here. It is thus significant to point out here that there are considerable differences in the experiences of individual students within the independent sector of education, even when their family backgrounds may appear quite similar.

One such student was Allie, whose family discourses and inherent expectations that she would apply to university were discussed in an earlier section of this chapter. Her parents had both had experience of Higher Education, with her father (who now owned his own business) having attended Oxford University, and her mother (a part-time teacher) having trained as a teacher in a training college. However, in spite of the large amount of cultural capital associated with a family educational background such as this, for Allie, the university application process did not culminate in a place at an elite university. Allie was one of the lower-attaining students in her year group, and by her own admission, she had not done as well as she had hoped in her AS level examinations. She was predicted to attain grades C to E in her A2 levels in Geography, History and French, which she would take in the summer of 2005. She had made applications to six universities which were mid-ranking (Sunday Times Good University Guide, 2005) and had received offers from five of them to study for a degree in Geography and French, which included an intercalated year of work or study in France. At the time of interview, Allie was making a decision

whether to accept her offer from Aberystwyth or Oxford Brookes University. It can be seen here that, however extensive the family's level of cultural capital, this is not the only significant factor in independent school students' university applications and their subsequent offers, as this is necessarily cross-cut by ability, a factor which is rarely considered in studies of independent schools as these studies tend to focus on those students who attain most highly. Moreover, this points to inter-sectoral distinctions within the independent sector of education, with students attending the academically selective and highly prestigious schools discussed in previous studies progressing to elite Higher Education institutions, with more modest achievements and lower-ranking university destinations being associated with those attending schools such as Midham.

However, in spite of their differing levels of attainment, the vast majority of young women attending Midham did wish to go to university. Of the 62 Sixth Form students who responded to my questionnaire, 57 (91.9%) said that they definitely wanted to go to university. 4 (6.5%) were unsure, and only 1 student (1.6%) definitely wanted to go into full-time employment at age eighteen. This bears significant similarity to other studies of educational decision-making at post-compulsory level (Roker, 1993; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). In these studies, middle class young people, and especially those educated in independent schools, are portrayed as following a standard trajectory through education, that is, from compulsory schooling, to the Sixth Form, to university and then on to a professional career. Further to this, lower-attaining students educated in the maintained sector of education have been

shown as being discouraged from applying to university by their teachers (Archer *et al.*, 2003), although lower-attaining students in the independent sector are rarely if ever considered. Additionally, some of the middle class students in a study by Brooks (2003, 2004, 2005) expressed that they wanted to go only to high-ranking universities, considering it ‘pointless’ to go to a lower-ranking university.

The aforementioned studies provide contrast to the experiences of lower attaining students at Midham, who were encouraged to apply to university, whatever their level of attainment, both by explicit and implicit discourses within the school, and tacit discourses within their families, which encouraged them to see university as a natural progression, their expected destination. Whilst there were some universities which would tend not to be considered by these students (as discussed in Chapter 3), the choice sets of universities they were considering were considerably wider than those of students from highly selective independent schools in previous studies (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2005) in that they included (and in some cases, consisted entirely of) new universities.

Moreover, students such as Allie and her fellow lower-achieving peers did not need such high levels of educational capital as they were able to rely instead on their high levels of economic, social and cultural capital: ‘members of favoured classes can get further on less educational capital, simply because they have access to large amounts of other kinds of capital’ (Moi, 1999: 274). Similarly, in Proweller’s study (1997), students from more affluent backgrounds attending an elite girls’ independent school were shown to not have to study so hard as their less affluent peers in order to

maintain their place in the middle class, as this was secured by their parents' secure financial position. However, the fact that young women from established middle class backgrounds attending Midham School perceived a discernible advantage in going to university, even in cases where their academic levels were not so high, can be attributed to their social status and their significant amounts of cultural and economic capital, as even if they were not academically outstanding, other capitals could contribute to the maintenance of their middle class status. These young women go to university because it is 'what people like us do' (Hutchings, 2003). Going to university thus becomes a social and cultural necessity for these young women, in order that they can retain their social location as members of an upper-middle class social elite.

Choice of Subject

The diminished importance of the academic side of going to university for those belonging to the most elite fractions of the middle class at Midham can further be seen with respect to the subjects that they chose to study, and related to this, their future ambitions. Unlike the independent school students studied by Reay *et al.*, (2005), the courses that this particular group of students chose were neither traditional academic subjects, nor were they high status vocational courses such as medicine and law. Indeed, few of these young women spoke of having plans for a particular career after going to university (the only exception was Jessica, who wanted to study Law and spoke of her future plans to practice as a

solicitor). This is not to say that they did not want or intend to have careers, with several students repeating to me the advice given by Kathryn Williams, the Careers teacher, that most careers do not require a degree in a specific subject.

However, ideas about specific careers do not appear to have been uppermost in their minds when they chose their degree subjects. Instead, courses were chosen for reasons of enjoyment, personal development and enhancement, and this was encouraged explicitly in some cases by discourses within the family. Lauren, for example, had discussed her potential subject of study with her father. He had given her encouragement to study a subject that she enjoyed, rather than just thinking of the future career that it would lead to, as he told her that studying any degree would be worthwhile. She was, at the time of interview, considering studying Psychology, as it was an option that she was enjoying at AS level. When I asked her if she had ideas about what she wanted to do when she left university, she said that she did not, as she had just wanted to study something she enjoyed.

Furthermore, these young women's social class and family financial position (economic capital) afforded them the possibility of taking an extended transition to adulthood (Holdsworth, 2004; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Bradley and Devadason, 2008) and to a career. Indeed, amongst this group of young women, it was rare for their plans to involve an immediate progression between school, university and into the labour market. This is illustrated by my questionnaire responses. Out of the 35 Lower Sixth students who responded to my questionnaire, 25 had

considered taking a Gap Year to go travelling, either before or after their degree, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common amongst middle class young people, particularly those who attend independent schools. Lauren was planning to do this, having decided to take a job for a few months to earn the money to travel for the rest of the year before starting her degree course. Further to this, another possibility of spending time travelling is available for students who take a degree course that includes a year studying or working abroad within it: this was something that Allie would do as part of her degree course in Geography and French.

These lengthy transitions further extended to the young women's careers and future plans, which in some cases, involved lengthy courses of study. Jane, one of the Lower Sixth students I interviewed, desired a career as a Child Psychologist, which she told me involved studying for a degree in Psychology, followed by a teaching qualification, and then a further lengthy professional qualification in Child Psychology. Her family's comfortable social class background and the financial support that they could offer her in such an extended course of study was evidently a factor in enabling her to make the decision to study for such an extended time period before being able to get a job in her desired profession.

Harriet was another established middle class student who was planning to make an extended transition. She planned to study for a degree in History, and had received offers from three pre-1992 universities to do so. However, Harriet's real interest and ambition lay in Drama, and she planned, after completing her degree, to go to a specialist Drama college. When I asked her whether she had considered studying Drama immediately

after her A2 Levels, rather than first going to university for another subject. She commented that she had heard that Drama colleges preferred students who were older and who had already studied for a degree. Consequently, it would seem that studying for a degree was, for Harriet, a way of passing the time until she was old enough to fulfil her real ambition. Moreover, her knowledge of her family's financial backing and her solid, secure middle class positioning enabled her to realise the possibility of spending several years making such an extensive transition prior to moving into the world of work.

As well as reflecting the possibility of a long transition prior to entry into the workforce, Harriet's decision to pursue a career in the performing arts reflects another available possibility for those whose position in the middle class is more secure: that of attempting entry into an area of work which was certainly less than stable, with the prospect of a future career in this field certainly far from guaranteed. Those who have a secure position in and relation to middle class-ness would appear to be more comfortable with confronting such potential setbacks, with the possibility of changing track if a problem, setback or even failure occurs (Devine, 2004). This possibility was evidently more available to those students from established middle class backgrounds than to those whose historical relationship with the middle class was liminal and thus reliant on academic success and the gaining of credentials (Allatt, 1993), with the latter placing more emphasis on the potential of progressing to a financially lucrative and secure career. Thus subject choice can be characterised for young women from established middle class backgrounds as being imbued with freedom and possibility.

with the potential for backtracking and making extended transitions within education before moving into a future career.

Conclusion

The background of the young women from the established middle class was solid and secure. Unlike those from less-established (liminal) middle class backgrounds,⁵² whose position was maintained through continually striving to achieve academic credentials (Allatt, 1993; Power, 2001) they do not need to study for particular courses, or at particular universities, to maintain their position in the middle class (Moi, 1999). It is enough that they will attend university for them to reproduce their middle class position, although it must be noted that there were significant limitations on which universities were seen as ‘acceptable’ for these young women, which have previously been discussed in Chapter 3.

The subjective position which these young women inhabited allowed them to perceive themselves as having relative freedom in their post-school decisions (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005), although they were able to adopt this subjective and agentic position on account of the presence of various discourses inherent in their family’s structural background. That they would go to university was unquestionable, and was an intrinsic yet undisclosed assumption in familial discourse. This discursive construction of the ‘choice’ to go to university (as in fact, a non-choice) was mirrored in earlier educational decisions which were made, in relation to which school to

⁵² Who are discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

attend and whether (or where) to continue their education at post-sixteen level. Discourses surrounding all of these areas subsequently led to subjective constructions of these young people as decision-making agents. Moreover, these discourses also delimit and give boundaries to these decisions, illuminating what is possible and what is unthinkable to ‘a person like me’. These discourses were very different for those whose position in the middle class is more tenuous and less secure, as will be seen in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Maintaining a Middle Class Social Location

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how, for those young women from established middle class backgrounds, privilege and a prestigious social class location was passed on from generation to generation. The security ensuing from their established social location meant that its maintenance was not necessarily reliant on educational credentials (Moi, 1999). Middle class families draw on cultural, economic and social resources across the generations in order to maintain their social advantage (Ball, 2003), and this places those middle class people whose origins are also in the middle class at an advantage compared to their peers whose origins are in the working class (Devine, 2004).

This chapter focuses on those young women at Midham whose attachment to the middle class was more tenuous, with less extensive and long-standing links to a middle class location and identity than their peers. Following Brooks (2003; 2005), I refer to these young women as belonging to the ‘liminal’ middle class, a term which itself draws on the anthropological work of Turner (1967) on transitions and rites of passage within the context of the Ntembu community. Turner uses the term ‘liminality’ to describe a period of time ‘betwixt and between’ two stable structural conditions. The individual becomes detached from his / her previous situation, passing through an ambiguous or ‘liminal’ state before the passage is consummated by the arrival of a changed but once again

stable condition. This concept has been used in more recent work to describe one's position in a state of transition between two locations, such as between childhood and adulthood (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005) and the transition to the middle class made by first-generation university entrants (Brooks, 2005). The position of this group of young women at Midham may be described as liminal on account of their less-longstanding relation to the middle class, their increased (and very real) fear of falling from this position, and their families' use of an independent school to consolidate and enhance the social position of their daughters, thus mediating parental concerns about their daughters returning to the family's (more recent) working class origins.

In this chapter, I discuss these young women's position within society and within the school. This is then related to the decisions that they made with regards to their education. For these young women and their families, education was perceived as a tool of social mobility, offering a real opportunity to maintain and/or improve their social class location, and thus to establish themselves as *bona fide* members of the middle class. In the first part of the chapter the background to this group will be discussed, and gaps in the currently available literature highlighted. Next, there will be a discussion of these young women's families' use of education as a way of securing their class location. Following on from and extending this point, discussion will then show how the decisions which these young women and their families made were underlain by a discourse of fear, which was always present and had a constraining effect on the decisions that they made relating to education and future careers. Finally, I discuss how this led to

the young women making decisions that were necessarily more individualised and strategic than those of their peers, although these were necessarily heavily influenced by their structural location, which provided both constraint and enablement.

Introducing the Liminal Middle Class

Whilst theories of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) have met with some success in explaining the persistency of inequality between the classes within educational systems, they have been rendered problematic by some working in this area (Jenkins, 1992; Connell *et al.*, 1982; Giroux, 1983; Nash, 1990; Hodkinson, 1998; Brooks, 2005). These authors have pointed to the lack of room within reproduction theories for individual resistance and agency or the possibility of transformation, with Giroux (1983: 259) stating that they 'leave no room for moments of self-creation, mediation and resistance'. The possibility of the instigation of agentic change is negated, and this has led to problems when attempting to use this theory to explain social mobility (Brooks, 2005). Whilst such theories can be used to explain how the established middle class young women described in the previous chapter were able to maintain their social location, it is less adequate in explaining how those whose recent family history was not in the middle class were able to gain and, in most cases, maintain a middle class social location. This necessitates a theory of transformation, where there is the possibility of transforming one's dispositions, and thus one's fate (Brooks, *ibid*; Reay, 1998b) through a more

individualised and agentic form of decision-making. This is not to say that decisions can be made without constraint, as some authors in the field of individualisation argue (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), but rather, that within boundaries that are constrained (and enabled) by one's social location in terms of social class and gender, there is the possibility of transformation through the decisions made by individuals and families.

Some recent studies have indicated how parents and students have been successful in changing their class dispositions (Reay, 1998b; Hodkinson, 1998; Brooks, 2005). For instance, in Reay's (1998b) study, some working class mothers who had an unsuccessful history within education transformed their negative dispositions towards schooling in order to enhance their offspring's education. Similarly, Brooks (2005) found that some parents of lower middle class young people who had no family history of Higher Education endeavoured to find out more about the sector and its requirements in order to aid their children in successful decision-making. In studies of the independent sector, the notion of the 'purchase' of privilege by parents who choose to pay for independent education for their offspring (Fox, 1985) indicates that a privileged social class location is a commodity that can be assured through the decision by individual families to utilise independent education for their children.

The aforementioned studies place emphasis on the idea of the self as a project to be worked on over time (Beck, 1992; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Proweller, 1997; O'Connor, 2006), with education as an important aspect of shaping the self. Indeed, the increased marketisation of education in recent years (Tomlinson, 2005) has constructed education as a consumer product;

with neoliberal educational policies constructing educational success as increasingly dependent on social class and parental finances (Brown, 1997).

Negotiation of pathways through this field is increasingly individualised (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), although young people's decision-making continues to be informed by their families (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005).

Decisions about education made on the family level are about prioritisation of the individual family's interests (Jordan *et al.*, 1994), with families constructing themselves as members of the middle class through the decisions they make (Devine, 2004; Allatt, 1993, 1996).

Decision-making can thus usefully be seen as operating on the level of individuals and families, although wider structural influences of social class remain highly significant. However, whilst recent studies on young people's decision-making in relation to Higher Education have gone some way towards addressing the problem of the lack of research on the middle class in education (Walkeridine *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005), there has tended to be an over-simplification of inter-class distinctions, between those middle class young people from highly privileged professional backgrounds, whose parents and other family members have attended university, and working class young people who are the first in their families to go to university. For instance, Walkeridine *et al.*, (2001: 59), referred to the middle class young women in their study seeing university as 'a rite of passage that most family members have undertaken', whereas they saw the working class young women who went to university as experiencing shifts in identity due to their lack of experience in this sector. This neglects the experiences of the significant number of young people from middle class

backgrounds who have no family experience of university, positioning them as a ‘muted group’ (Ardener, 1985; Delamont, 1989) whose experiences are rarely considered. Brooks’ (2005) study of middle class young people in a Sixth Form college, whose parents have no experience of university, provides a salutary exception to this within the Higher Education choice literature, as does Reay *et al.*’s (2005) discussion of the decision-making of middle class young people who attend schools in the maintained sector. However, these are contrasted in the latter study to those who attend independent schools, who are presented as having a similarity of experience and family background. Whilst such studies can be considered to address Power’s (2000) identification of the lack of research on the middle class in education, the continued portrayal of these groups as homogenous remains problematic. This ignores the clear intra-class distinctions in terms of educational background and careers which have been brought forward in studies of educational decision-making at the family level (Devine, 2004; Gorard, 1997).

Accordingly, it is indicated that there is a need for social class to be seen as more fractional, with a variety of influences leading to decision-making that operates in different ways for different class fractions. The young women from the liminal middle class clearly had a different relation to their social class than those in the established middle class, with the former gaining their position through education, as discussed below and the latter through a combination of education and family heritage, as discussed in the previous chapter. Crompton (1992) has noted the diversity of the range of influences that affect the social consciousness of middle class

people in their educational decision-making, including their family origin and social class background, their family experience of Higher Education, and their gender. Further to this, Savage *et al.*, (1992) identify three sections of the middle class: (i) the petit-bourgeois, (ii) professionals and (iii) managers, who each rely on different assets in their process of identity formation (respectively (i) property, (ii) culture, and (iii) their place in an institutional hierarchy). Moreover, Allen *et al.* (2007) in their analysis of neighbourhood and housing choice, refer to a group which they call the ‘marginal’ middle classes, who are employed in lower-end professional jobs and are contrasted with more established members of the middle class. Some of these distinctions may be seen to be more useful than others in pursuing the topic of this thesis.

In relation to decision-making relating to education in middle class families, Devine (2004) discusses differences between a well-established middle class group of parents who worked as doctors, whose origins were in the middle class and who were well-equipped to help their offspring retain this social location. She contrasts these with a less established middle class group of teachers, who had working class origins, and whose practices in relation to their children’s education were characterised by significant levels of anxiety. This anxiety is further mediated through discourses of credentialism and credential inflation (Ainley, 1998; Grenfell and James, 1998), which hold the gaining of credentials (such as a university degree) as an essential pre-requisite for entry into high-level occupations. This has grown over time, with increasing necessity for higher level qualifications leading to those who do not gain such qualifications becoming increasingly

left behind (Dyer and Wyn, 2001). Middle class families thus have to do more and more if they wish to maintain their social location, necessitating 'constant purposeful activity' (Allatt, 1993), and this is particularly the case when one's relationship to the middle class is less secure. This can further be seen in Proweller's study (1997) which focusses on an elite girls' school in the USA, where young women from relatively less affluent backgrounds had to study hard in order to maintain their place in the school (which was often dependent on scholarships and grants necessitating high academic performance) and within the middle class as a whole through gaining a place at university.

In this connection, it is significant to note that many parents whose offspring attend independent schools themselves attended schools in the maintained sector (Johnson, 1987; Gorard, 1997): indeed, a recent report from the Independent Schools Council (ISC, 2006) notes that 40% of parents whose children attend independent schools did not attend one themselves. Studies of parental decision-making have found that particularly first-time users of independent schools tend to view them as opportunity structures, leading to enhanced opportunity and social mobility for their children (Lee and Marks, 1992). Furthermore, and contrary to their portrayal in recent studies such as those by Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001) and Reay *et al.*, (2001, 2005), many parents of young people educated in the independent sector have not themselves attended university (ISC, 2007). Consequently, these parents are in a similar position to the parents of students in the state-maintained Sixth Form college studied by Brooks (2005) and the maintained schools and colleges discussed by Reay *et al.*

(2001, 2005). However, no currently available study focuses on the education-related decisions being made by young people who, whilst educated in the independent sector, have a relation to the middle class that is less well established, in a process of liminality and transition.

The Independent School Effect

Independent schools have been viewed both by pupils and their parents as giving young people ‘the edge’ (Roker, 1993: 121) over those educated in the maintained sector of education. This is because of perceptions of their generally smaller class sizes, more focussed and individual attention, perception of high academic standards and positive orientation towards education, including staying on at school for post-compulsory education, and progressing to a high status course and university.⁵³ Further to this, Reay *et al.* (2001) raise the concept of a ‘school effect’, with the decisions which young people make about their Higher Education as significantly tied in with the educational institution attended. This is based on the Bourdieusian notion of institutional habitus, and is seen as having a profound effect on the decisions that students make. This concept has already been discussed in previous chapters, but here it will be related specifically to the decisions that were made by those of my respondents (and their families) who emanated from liminal middle class backgrounds. It will be demonstrated to have an effect on their decision to

⁵³ Although Gorard (1997) has noted that not all independent schools have high academic standards.

go to Midham in the first place, and further, to affect their dispositions regarding their futures and what options are suitable for them. It will further be shown how, for this group in particular, a perceived lack of parental knowledge in relation to Higher Education (social and cultural capital) was mediated through attendance at an independent school.

The negotiation of the initial decision-making process in sending the student to Midham has previously been noted to involve negotiation between the parents and the young women themselves (see Chapter 4). In terms of parental decision-making, studies have shown this to be tied-in with socio-cultural factors, relating to ambitions for the child's academic future and prospective career (Fox, 1985), and further, for education to take place amidst one's social peers (West and Noden, 2004). However, the decision to send one's child to an independent school is usually considered in relation to parents desiring to reproduce their own social position and educational background (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Ball, 2003), whereas at Midham many of the young women's parents wanted to better the education they had had. Like the working class families in the study by David *et al.*, (2003) they were seeking to 'transform their fate' rather than reproduce their own backgrounds.⁵⁴

For these parents, the initial decision to send their daughters to Midham was often made on academic grounds. Unlike for their peers from

⁵⁴ The class locations of the parents of the young women who took part in the study was established through interview discussion of their families' educational backgrounds and current occupations. Those from the liminal middle class tended to have parents who had attended schools in the maintained sector, and had left education at the age of sixteen or eighteen. Their parents tended to be employed in lower-level professional or managerial roles. By contrast, those from more established middle-class backgrounds had parents who had attended independent schools (and in some cases boarding schools). The parents tended to have stayed on in school until the age of eighteen, and (particularly in the case of their fathers) had usually attended university, before progressing on to a high-status professional career or owning their own successful business.

the established middle class, there was in many cases no automatic assumption that these young women would attend an independent school. Indeed, their ‘choice sets’ (Gorard, 1996) often included maintained schools, in addition to those from the independent sector. Furthermore, similar to many of the families in Johnson’s (1987) study, these families had often used schools in the maintained sector before their daughters reached the age of eleven.

This had been the case for Olivia’s family. She was in the Lower Sixth at Midham at the time of her interview, was studying for AS levels in Business Studies, Psychology, English Literature and Information Technology (IT). On leaving school, Olivia planned to go to university to study Business or IT. Up until the age of eleven, she had attended a maintained sector primary school, but as the time neared when she would transfer to secondary school her parents had begun to consider the independent sector, particularly as they had not been keen on their local maintained secondary school. Olivia summed up their decision-making as follows:

Olivia: It was either here [Midham], or somewhere like Horlton [the local maintained school], which my parents didn't think would be very good, because it hasn't got a good reputation [...] it's kind of good for sports, but it isn't good academically [...] So... we just decided this would be better.

Similarly, for Rachael, who was in the Upper Sixth when she was interviewed, the decision to go to Midham had involved a decision between remaining in the maintained sector, or moving into the independent sector. She and her parents had looked around some of the local maintained schools, and she had sat the examination for the highly selective Princess Alice High. However, she had preferred Midham to the alternative available options:

Rachael: *my parents gave me the option, they let me come and look round here, and at [Princess Alice High] [...] and I also looked round the state schools and things, and I didn't really like my local state school, and [Midham] just seemed to be really friendly and it was an option [...] and my parents said I could come here if I wanted to, so...*

Of note in these discourses is that, unlike their peers from more established middle class backgrounds, for these young women going to Midham involved a decision between the independent sector and the maintained sector, similar to those middle class families in previous studies by Johnson (1987), Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) and Gorard (1997). They saw their position in an independent school as something that was neither guaranteed nor taken for granted, and which had to be justified on the grounds of academic factors or their own happiness. This justification of the decision to use an independent school was similar to those students from the ‘intelligentsia’ in Delamont’s (1989) study. However, these young

women differed profoundly from the young women in Delamont's study in their outlook. Whilst Delamont's young women and their families rejected certain aspects of 'middle class-ness', portraying their presence at an independent school as anomalous, those at Midham saw independent education as a way of improving their own social location. In effect, it was a way of becoming and remaining middle class.

In rejecting maintained (state) schools, on account of their perception of their poor academic performance, they further revealed their belief in selection within the education system on an academic level, with their perceived academic ability as necessitating a school which was able to cater for this. The independent sector was viewed by these families as being able to provide this, as it was for those families interviewed by West and Noden (2004) who chose independent schools for their offspring on account of their perception that these would provide a more academic education, and maximise their children's potential.

In fact, some parents had seen Midham as having the potential to provide their daughters with a very different education to their own, with increased opportunities for both social advancement and a prestigious future location encompassing attendance of Higher Education and a professional occupation. In this way, they could be seen as similar to those parents in the studies by Connell *et al.*, (1982) and David *et al.*, (2003), who wanted their children to transform their fates through education. Here too, family discourses about the improvement of the personal (and family's) position through education link to neoliberal discourses, with individual work and

the successful gaining of qualifications seen as the key to a successful future (Nairn and Higgins, 2007).

For Jenny's mother, the decision to send her daughter to Midham has been made on account of her perception that her own education had been poor.

Jenny: *She was determined I would have a good education, because [...] she had a terrible education, and she was like, 'Well, you have to have an amazing one [...] you have to have a private education'.*

Moreover, Jenny did not only feel that her mother's feeling about her own education had affected the initial decision to send her to Midham, but that this had had an effect on the later decisions which she herself had made. At the time of interview, Jenny was in the Lower Sixth, and she was planning to make an application to study either English or French at Cambridge University. Her mother's disappointment at her own relatively poor educational background had caused her to encourage Jenny to make the most of her own education, which Jenny considered had contributed to her subsequent hard work, educational success thus far, and decision to apply to a prestigious and high-ranking university. This had further been encouraged by her parents taking her to look round the town of Cambridge during the summer holidays, which had reinforced her desire to apply to the university.

Similarly, another Lower Sixth student, Hayley, had felt that her parents, and in particular, her father, had been particularly encouraging with regard to her education, because of his frustration and regret in relation to his own education.

Hayley: I've been brought up to believe that I should be going to university [...] purely because my parents didn't get the opportunity to go – my Dad got into a really good university, one of the best in the country, at that time, to do a really good course, and he couldn't get... the money to be able to fund to go, and he didn't get the opportunity to go [...] so my dad wants the best for me, and he thinks that university would help.

Again, this sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with their own educational background had led to Hayley's parents' decision to prioritise education for their children (Hayley and her younger brother), sending them both to independent schools for the whole of their educational career, and, furthermore, providing encouragement that they should apply to university. Like Jenny, Hayley's parents had been keen for her to start considering universities from an early stage, and they were planning to start looking round universities as a family in the near future.

Moreover, for Joanna, another student from the Lower Sixth whose family background was in the liminal middle class, attending an independent school and then progressing to university was part of a personal

plan that would enable her to be, as she referred to it during interview discussion, ‘above other people, not on the lower level’. As the interview progressed, it became clear that Joanna saw her own parents to be ‘on the lower level’, because of the relatively low status of their jobs. This was not a derogatory comment, but rather, an expression of the frustration experienced by Joanna’s parents, on account of the limitations that had been imposed on their careers and earning power by not having degrees. Indeed, they had had considerable financial concerns, and paying Joanna’s school fees had been a source of difficulty, culminating in a recent situation where Joanna had been on the verge of leaving Midham to attend a local comprehensive school. Happily for Joanna, her parents had eventually found the money for her to be able to continue into the Sixth Form at Midham, although it had been a source of stress for the family. Seeing her parents’ frustration and money worries had led Joanna to feel that studying for a degree was necessary in order to improve her own social location: ‘I can see where it’s got them [...] without going to university, and I really want to become high powered and all that kind of thing so...’. Again, for Joanna, her education was seen as holding the potential for social mobility (Lee and Marks, 1992).

Indeed, these three vignettes clearly illustrate the differences between the students whose background was in the liminal middle class, and those from other studies of educational decision-making at this stage, such as Walkerdine *et al.*, (2001); Reay *et al.*, (2001, 2005); David *et al.*, (2003); Ball *et al.*, (2002). For the middle class students in these studies, university was part of a discourse of reproduction of the family’s social class location.

with some students in the latter study going as far as applying to the same Oxbridge college previously attended by a relative. By contrast, for some of the young women at Midham, going to university was part of a catalogue of events, starting with an independent school education, which were planned within the family to improve their social standing compared to that of their parents. Familial discourses, and the young women's ultimate decisions regarding going to university bore more resemblance to those decisions made by the students at a Sixth Form college in Brooks' study (2004, 2005), or even the working class students who went on to Higher Education in Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) study, who made their decisions in order that they did not end up in the same situation as their parents. Their experiences were characterised by liminality, an interstructural position located on their way to becoming a fully-fledged middle class member, with university attendance as a crucial *rite de passage* (Turner, 1967).

For young women such as Jenny, Hayley and Joanna, their acknowledgement of their parents' class locations as inherently insecure, through discourses within the home, led them to desire better and more secure positions for themselves. Furthermore, for their parents the process of securing their children's position in the middle class would be guaranteed and completed by their going to university, with their education in an independent school perceived as having the potential to transform their futures.

Discourses of Fear

From the preceding discussion, it can be seen that for some of the young women at Midham, independent schooling offered the possibility of securing their middle class identities. Both the young women and their respective parents saw this as being achieved through educational success. Consequently, parents aspired for their children to have a better education than themselves. Further, they were in a financial position to afford to send them to an independent school, which they viewed as providing a suitable education to assure that their offspring's position in the middle class would be retained, or even, in some cases, improved relative to their own.

However, the young women's futures were perceived as by no means assured, leading to the perpetuation of a discourse of fear amongst these families, of what would happen if the young women were to be unsuccessful in their education. Indeed, unlike for the more established middle class students discussed in the previous chapter, whose continued location in the middle class did not rely on academic achievement, for those students from more liminal middle class backgrounds, and their parents, educational attainment was perceived as critical in order to maintain their social location.

Over the last few decades, the effects of class have been increasingly mediated through educational processes (Savage, 2000), and consequently, educational achievement has been rendered increasingly crucial for young people from liminal middle class backgrounds, in order to maintain their position in the middle class. Educational credentials have become ever more important to future success, with professional careers increasingly demanding university-level qualifications from entrants (Ainley, 1998;

Grenfell and James, 1998). As overall levels of educational achievement increase, with more and more young people staying on at school after the earliest leaving age and more attending university, the disadvantaged position of those who are left outside the system becomes more sharply defined (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001).

This has led to those families from the liminal middle class, whose position in the middle class is inherently more unstable, becoming more fearful in relation to their retention of this position. They did not have the security of the reproduction of social class advantage through the conveyance of social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), as did their peers who had more secure and established middle class backgrounds. Rather, like the middle class families in Devine's study, who had their origins in the working class, they were 'unable to draw on the resources, held over generations, compared with established middle class families' (2004: 10). This led to anxiety for these parents in relation to helping their daughters with their education, in order that a middle class social location could be maintained.

Indeed, it can be seen that discourses within the family played a significant role in shaping the perceptions of the young women from liminal middle class backgrounds at Midham, regarding their future options and the nature (and necessity) of success. Anxiety about maintaining their social location was clearly apparent here. Rather than the tacit and untold assumption of university as part of a standard progression through education, this tended to have been a matter for discussion within the family, with parental discourses expressing encouragement for their

daughters to go to university. For Charlotte, a Lower Sixth student whose parents had not attended university, encouragement to go to university had been explicit rather than subtle:

Charlotte: My parents have hammered it into me that at this day and age, we have so much more opportunity [...] they're just saying that if you want to get anywhere, you're going to have to outshine other people, by getting a degree, especially as so many people are getting degrees now.

Whilst Charlotte's account of her parents' encouragement for her to go to university began as one of wistful wishing on the part of her parents that the opportunities now available to their daughter had been available to them, along with hope that she would take up these opportunities, it quickly became a discourse of fear, of what would happen if Charlotte decided not to take up these opportunities. Devine (2004) argues that families who are secure in their middle class social location are more able to mediate failure or a poor performance, but questions this possibility for those in a less secure position: a similar perspective is also adopted by Proweller (1997). In Charlotte's case, her parents' own knowledge of the labour market situation, gained from their own experience in the workplace, had led them to the opinion that gaining a degree was essential to gaining a 'good' job (that is, a middle class job), something which is clearly seen to be the case on account of ever-increasing credentialism (Ainley, 1998). They had therefore passed on these messages to Charlotte, regarding the necessity to

study for a degree in order to ‘outshine other people’. Their concern was evident that however well she performed academically, her performance would still be judged in relation to other people, who, if they performed better, may potentially be able to usurp her position in the middle class. This is, furthermore, not only a discourse of fear but of individualism and a desire to gain individual success, with the ever-increasing numbers of young people who go to university rendering staying ahead of the majority increasingly problematic.

The use of the phrase ‘if you want to get anywhere’ here is also telling, revealing fears on the part of both Charlotte and her parents that if she did not go to university and get a degree, she would not be successful, and would not ‘get anywhere’. Indeed, the idea of ‘getting somewhere’ was highly significant for these young women. Their parents were ‘class travellers’ whose own backgrounds were often located in the working class and who had moved into the middle class through education or employment.⁵⁵ These young women thus saw it as equally necessary to ‘make something of themselves’ (Skeggs, 1997) and to improve their class location still further, cementing their location as members of the middle class through their own education and prospective professional employment.

The majority of young women from this group were planning on following standard pathways through education and on to employment (Du

⁵⁵ Reay (1997) refers to Christine, one of the women whom she studied, as ‘classless’, as she came from a working class background but, through her educational and occupational success, now led a middle-class lifestyle. In a similar connection, I have employed the term ‘class traveller’ here to refer to parents’ whose backgrounds were in the working class (as evidenced through their daughters’ descriptions of their educational and home backgrounds) but who had moved through educational and / or occupational success, and also through lifestyle choices such as choosing to send their children to an independent school, into the middle class.

Bois-Reymond, 1998; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), staying on at school until the age of eighteen, followed by university and then a professional career. When asked about her plans for the future, Jenny told me that she aimed to ‘Go to university, get some form of degree, no idea what, and get a job!’, which very adequately summed up the transition process for herself and the other liminal middle class students. Indeed, unlike their more established middle class peers, who had the freedom to make extended transitions to the workplace, the majority of students from the liminal middle class had their plans laid out much more rigidly, with less digression from their path to professional careers. For instance, Louise and Gemma, from the Lower Sixth, dismissed Gap Years as ‘rubbish’ and ‘false’. They both felt that the charity aspect of Gap Years was misplaced, as their perception was that people took part in these projects ‘because they want[ed] to’ rather than through a desire to help charity. In highlighting this, Louise and Gemma set themselves and their friends, who were going straight on to Higher Education, up against those students who were taking time out from their studies to travel and take part in charity work. This awareness of the immediate necessity of progression through the educational system and into a professional career was antithetical to the perceived positive benefits of a Gap year, as was presented to the young women in a Careers talk on the subject from a Gap year company. Their peers from more established middle class backgrounds, by contrast, were able to take up such discourses. For those students from liminal middle class backgrounds, time out from study was something that could not be afforded – the standard pathway had to be followed.

Not only was it important for these young women to follow a standardised pathway, but it was also important that they opted for the ‘right’ subjects. This was a source of concern for some of the students whom I interviewed, and for their parents. This was apparent in the case of Hayley, whose father’s enthusiasm that she should get a good education was discussed earlier in the chapter. In my interview with Hayley, it could be seen that her father had very specific ideas about her education. These could be explained by a fear that if she took the wrong options, or did not perform well, she would be unsuccessful and possibly fall from the middle class, into the ‘abyss’ (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) of the family’s working class origins. Academic ambition and potential success was something that had to be constantly strived for (Allatt, 1993). This could be seen when I asked Hayley about the decisions that she had made, and what her family thought about these:

Helen: *Are your family happy with the choices you’ve made, with A Levels and University and that sort of thing?*

Hayley: *My parents are happy, and my Dad is happy with what I’m doing now [...] he didn’t want me to do ‘soft’ subjects [...] so I haven’t done any ‘soft’ subjects.*

Helen: *What do you mean, ‘soft’ subjects?*

Hayley: Well in my Dad's eyes, a 'soft' subject is drama, art, psychology, HE [Home Economics] [...] I mean I agree with him to be honest...

In spite of this, Hayley had in fact chosen to study for AS levels in Psychology (which her father had referred to as a ‘soft’ subject) and Business Studies (another subject which some high-ranking universities have defined as providing unsuitable preparation for entry, as will be seen below) as well as English Literature and Economics. When questioned further about her subject choices, Hayley said that her father had come round to the idea that Psychology was a challenging subject since she had started the course, and he had seen the quantity of work which she had had to do. With regards to Business Studies, Hayley’s father had recommended that she study this subject, as he believed that it would provide a good foundation for a future career. Thus not only do Hayley’s subject choices reflect the potential for individual’s practice to go against the dominant discourse, but they also show how, for those from liminal middle class backgrounds, parental discourse may be misinformed or based on partial and limited information.

Discourses of the prestige of particular subjects are reinforced by lay messages that appear in the media, and official messages that are given out by universities. For instance, in the media, and even in the political arena, certain subjects and universities are frequently held up for condemnation and derision (Woodward, 2003). For parents who had no experience and

little knowledge of universities, the media was likely to provide their main source of information and knowledge about the sector.

Further, some top universities, such as Cambridge and the London School of Economics, have stated that they regard certain A2 level subjects as providing a less effective preparation for their courses, and would give preference to applicants who had studied for A levels in traditional academic subjects. For example, this is laid out on the admissions website for Cambridge University,⁵⁶ in the section on entry requirements, where a list of subjects is provided, which are considered to provide a ‘less effective preparation’ for their courses. These include Art and Design, Accounting, Business Studies, Media Studies and Sports Studies. The website further states that:

To be a realistic applicant, a student will normally need to be offering two traditional academic subjects (ie two subjects not on this list). For example, Mathematics, History and Business Studies would be an acceptable combination of subjects for a number of our courses. However, History, Business Studies and Media Studies would not normally be considered to be acceptable as this combination contains only one subject not from the list below.

⁵⁶ www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/requirements

For those students from the established middle class, whose class position would be retained regardless of the university attended, or course studied, discourses such as this would be less significant.⁵⁷ However, for those from the liminal middle classes, who saw their continued location in the middle class as being maintained through education success⁵⁸, studying highly regarded subjects was important, as a way of improving their chances of gaining a place at a prominent university and carrying on to a prestigious professional career.

Furthermore, it was considered important to these young women and their families that they should pursue courses at university which were either highly regarded and academically prestigious (such as French or Philosophy), or high status more vocationally based courses (such as those in Business or IT). Hayley, for example, had decided that she wanted to study Business Studies and Management, as she thought that it was relevant to a prospective future career. Similarly, Joanna had been strategic when making her decision about what to study at university, as she wanted to study a subject that would lead to a good job. Her future ambition was to become an Actuary, a highly paid and prestigious career. Research into this career had informed her that she would need to study for a degree in Mathematics, so this was what she had chosen to do. She also thought that if she changed her mind about her future career, a degree in Mathematics would leave lots of doors open to her, whereas with other subjects, her range

⁵⁷ See discussion in chapter 5 on the subject choices made by those students from established middle class backgrounds (page 247).

⁵⁸ Young women interviewed by Proweller, 1998, saw their education in a similar way, perceiving that it was necessary to work extremely hard at school in order to maintain their place in the middle class through the gaining of a university place and ultimately, a professional career.

of options may be more limited. Further to this, as she would have to pay university tuition fees, she wanted to study something that would provide a good return on her investment, rather than something that she would necessarily find interesting:

Joanna: I feel like I can't choose a subject that will be probably not much use to me later, because with doing Maths, I know it will be useful, whereas if I do something that will really interest me, it's probably more slimmer [...] and if you're paying fees for it, you want to have a confirmed job at the end of university...

For students such as Joanna, decisions about Higher Education were to be made for practical and career-based reasons, rather than simply for enjoyment, or because of an interest in the subject. Whilst other students from the liminal middle class did say that they had decided on their subjects as they enjoyed them (and indeed, Joanna did say that she ‘loved’ Mathematics and was ‘not too bad’ at it), ideas about the prestige of particular subjects and their usefulness in getting a future career were never far from their minds. Several other students mentioned that they had already thought about their potential future career options, when choosing their university options, and in some cases, when deciding which subjects to take for their AS and A2 levels. Nicole and Charlotte both wanted to be teachers, Kerry wanted to become a psychologist, and Eleanor wanted to work in finance. Students who did not specify a particular career intention

(such as Hayley, Isabel and Olivia) tended to be planning on opting for broad Business or IT-based subjects that they considered would lead on to a variety of different careers.

For these students, discourses of fear were ever-present. These discourses related to their own educational performance, subjects chosen and potential destinations, and the fear of deviation from prescribed and established pathways to the middle class. With educational processes increasingly tied in with social class (Savage, 2000), and the following of a standard pathway through education considered to lead to the prestige and (class) security of a professional career, it is little wonder that these young women made the decision to follow this pathway rather than deviating from it (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Education for these young women can thus be viewed as potentially transformative of their own (and consequently, their family's) destiny, but apparently this can only be the case if particular pathways are followed. The insecurity of their families' social locations meant that they necessarily had to be more strategic in their decision-making than their peers from the more established middle class were, in order to ensure that they made the 'right' decisions, with the consequences of a wrong decision far more critical.

Individualised and Strategic Decision-Making

The previous section has revealed that the decisions made by the young women from the liminal middle class were necessarily tactical and more strategic than those of their peers whose middle class location was

more secure. This section will discuss how these decisions were necessarily individualised, because of the lack of practical help that the parents of these young women could offer to their offspring, and assumptions made on the part of the school relating to their family experience and knowledge of Higher Education. It will additionally explore how discourses of individualised and agentic action were an intrinsic part of the decision-making process for these young women, in order to produce an adequate construction of themselves as middle class decision-makers, transforming their own dispositions in order to become more like their peers who were more familiar with the sector.

Informing oneself about universities and the application process clearly takes time, particularly when one has little prior background knowledge about the area from ones' family which can be drawn on. Indeed, these young women started their decision-making at a very early stage. Similar to those lower middle class students in Brooks' (2005) study, they started considering their plans in terms of university and careers in the early part of their time in the Sixth Form, and in some cases, even before this. As noted in the previous section, Joanna had already begun to research into her prospective future career as an Actuary by the time of her interview, at the beginning of her second term in the Lower Sixth. Jenny had gone to look round Cambridge University with her parents during the summer before she had started in the Sixth Form. Those who had not yet started considering university were planning to do this in the near future. For example, Isabel and Olivia had an idea of what subjects they might like to study (Business and IT) by the time I interviewed them, in the second term

of their Lower Sixth Year, and had begun to look in the prospectuses and university guides in the Careers room, in order to start deciding which universities they might apply to.

This eagerness to begin considering their future education and career was, in part, reflected in the school's Careers provision. Like other schools in the independent sector (Pugsley, 2003, 2004), at Midham, planning for university decision-making began early, with the young women being encouraged to consider their future options from an early stage. Careers lessons, which focussed on decision-making at the age of eighteen-plus, began in the November of their first year in the Sixth Form, and these lessons continued on a fortnightly basis until they began their A2 level examinations, in May of their Upper Sixth year. The careers teacher, Kathryn Williams, was available for individual consultations with students who wished to discuss their prospective university and / or career options, throughout their time in the Sixth Form, and they were offered interviews with an advisor from the local Connexions service once a year.⁵⁹ They were also able to use the Careers Room, located in the Sixth Form block of the school, during free periods and lunch breaks, and this was well utilised by the young women, as was the Sixth Form Computer Room where students were able to look up prospective courses and universities on the internet.

However, all of these facilities necessitated students being proactive about their decision-making. They had to do some individual research

⁵⁹ Connexions is an organisation that provides one-to-one advice for young people between the ages of 13-19, supporting them in their transition to adulthood. Arising out of the former County Careers Service, beginning with a pilot stage in 2001, they now cover various issues including careers, education, health, housing and relationships.

about their decisions. Some students whom I interviewed, particularly those from the Lower Sixth, had not yet fully grasped this. For instance, Louise had been to an interview with the Connexions advisor, but she told me that she ‘didn’t think that she [the advisor] was very useful’. When probed further, Louise told me that she had not known what she wanted to do for a career, and the Connexions advisor had suggested various options that had not interested her:

Louise: I was like, ‘I don’t know what to do’, and she was like, ‘how about something in media?’ [...]’ Oh I don’t really want to do that...’ ‘Well how about this?’ ‘No, I don’t really want to do that’ [...] She was rubbish.

Similarly, Charlotte had had little luck in finding out which universities might be suitable for her to look round:

Charlotte: The school have said ‘Go to Open days’ – Open Days to where, which are good? Because I said, ‘Which are prestigious?’ to the careers teacher and ‘Oh, loads of them’ but that doesn’t really narrow it down.

Gemma had also found the school’s role in her decision-making process so far to be frustrating:

Gemma: *They're not very good at that kind of thing, really
[...] they expect you to have a certain idea about it, and
know where you want to go, and it's like, how?*

However, it seemed that all three students were expecting the person they were asking for advice (Kathryn Williams or the Connexions advisor) to make decisions on their behalf. Indeed, these students, who were all in the Lower Sixth, had done little individual searching so far, something which was necessary in order to equip oneself to make successful decisions about one's future. However, in spite of their criticisms, by the time of my interviews with them, during their second term in the Lower Sixth, these young women appeared to be beginning to realise the necessity of individual research in order to inform the decisions they were making about university.

Substantial individualised effort was indeed highly significant for students when deciding on a prospective university and / or future career. This was particularly the case for those from liminal middle class backgrounds, whose families were often unable to give them advice on these decisions due to their own lack of knowledge of the area. For those students in the Upper Sixth, who were further on in the decision-making process, the amount of practical help which students' parents were able to give them in the decision-making process in turn influenced the amount of help that they had to seek individually from other sources. The other sources used included careers lessons and talks, teachers, Careers advisors and sources such as books and the internet.

Indeed, for some of the Upper Sixth students at Midham, it was evident that their families' relative lack of cultural and social capital and knowledge of university had necessitated more individualised action in order that they could be constructed as a middle class, agentic decision-maker, and subsequently, a successful transition to university could be made. Nicole, a student from the Upper Sixth, told me that her parents had been supportive in her decision-making, listening to her talking about universities, looking at prospectuses with her and attending university open days. However, their own lack of knowledge about university had hindered them somewhat. Consequently, Nicole had taken home leaflets and handouts given to her in Careers lessons, and her parents had read these, in an attempt to find out more about the application process so that they could offer more help. Further to this, Nicole had sought a considerable amount of advice from Kathryn Williams about her prospective subject of study (Geography, which Kathryn Williams taught as well as her work in Careers) and the future career that she was considering in primary teaching.

Another Upper Sixth student, Kerry, was also the first in her family to go to university, and this had necessitated her seeking far more advice on an individual level regarding her options. Indeed, the help that Kerry's parents had offered to her in her decision-making had been on an emotional rather than practical level, similar to the working class parents in David *et al.*'s (2003) study. Her mother had, for example, raised concerns about Kerry's potential safety, as she intended to live in London (where she

planned to attend Royal Holloway, a college of the University of London)⁶⁰, and about the possible strain of her desired future career as a psychologist. However, Kerry's parents knew little about university itself, or the application process that their daughter was going through. Although they were keen to help her, and Kerry described them as 'very excited' about her going to university, their lack of university experience and knowledge about this area had led to them being able to offer little practical advice. Consequently, Kerry had necessarily had to draw heavily on other resources, such as the school and her peers, in order to gain relevant information and knowledge about Higher Education and the application process. She told me that she had found the school Careers lessons and handouts useful, as they had covered topics which she had largely been unaware of before, such as finance, gap years and the timescale of the application process. Like Nicole, she had taken the handouts home for her parents to read, which had helped them to learn more about the process she was going through. Kerry was also extremely enthusiastic about the individual careers advice that she had received from Kathryn Williams, referring to her as 'very helpful' and 'indispensable'. Furthermore, she had gained advice about university applications from her boyfriend, who was a year older than her and, having already been through the university application process, was now studying at a university in London. Although she did not intend to go to the same university as her boyfriend, Kerry intended to study near London, and visits to her boyfriend had further

⁶⁰ The fact that Royal Holloway is in fact in Egham, Surrey, rather than in London itself, reveals the lack of knowledge which both Kerry and her parents had about universities.

enabled her to resolve practical issues that she had had around transport and accommodation.

Thus, although Kerry's family were unable to offer her much advice on her university applications, she had been able to overcome this limitation by seeking advice on an individual level, from the Careers teacher and from social peers such as her boyfriend. She had retained and utilised information given to her in Careers lessons and talks, and used this to inform her decision-making. Her actions here were those of an individualised and highly agentic decision-maker, negotiating her own way through the process and seeking help from knowledgeable sources where necessary. The amount and type of help she received was, however, predicated on her structural position as a middle class young woman attending an independent school. Her decision-making and subjective consciousness were necessarily informed by her class, as mediated through her educational background in the independent sector, with her access to this sector enabled by the economic capital of her family. This had made particular kinds of advice and knowledge available to her, as well as an institutional expectation of university as a norm, and had put her in a position where her social peers were likely to also experience university and be a possible source of advice. Her family's lack of cultural capital was in this way overcome, both by her own agency, and by her parents' economic capital, which had enabled her to attend an independent school and gain access to these discourses relating to university.

Both Kerry and Nicole were highly successful students, gaining offers at all six of the universities to which they applied. By their

individualised negotiation of the decision-making process, and their seeking of help when appropriate and necessary, they were able to transform their lack of familial experience of university, thus becoming middle class decision-making individuals.

However, in spite of the presence of such individualised discourses. theses of individualism (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2001) must still be rejected here, on account of their suggestion of the decreased role of the family in decision-making, and young people's increased responsibility for their own futures. Whilst the young women from Midham School who belonged to the liminal middle classes did have to negotiate individual routes through education, as their families' lack of experience meant that they were unable to advise them directly, their families still played a major part in the process of decision-making. They gave their daughters emotional support and encouragement in their applications, and informed themselves about the process by reading information that their daughters brought home from school, looking at prospectuses with their daughters, and attending university open days as a family. This is similar to those parents of first generation university applicants in Brooks' (2005) study, who also actively helped their offspring with their decision-making in any way they could. Indeed, my interviews with students at Midham revealed an overall atmosphere of enthusiasm from families in relation to their daughters' decisions to apply to Higher Education: for instance, Eleanor referred to her family seeing her going to university as a 'novel experience', which they were 'very excited' about. Further to this, Kathryn Williams highlighted that the vast majority of parents were keen for their daughters to

go to university, referring to the parents' role in encouraging their daughters to continue their education, something that she perceived to be the case whether or not the students' parents had attended university.

In this way, it is highlighted that the family plays a continued role in decision-making, as has been further shown in other recent studies (Brooks, 2005; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Rather than a decline in the role of the family, as the expansion in Higher Education leads to the increasing entry of more and more young people to university, the role of the family becomes one of support and encouragement to improve one's situation through trying out a new experience, rather than cultural reproduction.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how middle class educational processes are more diverse than is portrayed in some studies. People who would define themselves as middle class differ widely, with their family social class and educational background as clear sources of difference. These differences can be conceptualised through consideration of the differences in their family educational histories and experiences, their current and former occupations, and their history and length of identifying with 'middle-classness'. However, in today's society, dominated by free markets and neo-liberalism, there is a perception of meritocracy, where high status positions are won through education. This perspective was omnipresent amongst the young women from an elite independent school studied by Roker (1993) under the Conservative administration. Such views continue to be pervasive in the post-1997 era, in spite of studies that show

that high status jobs and university places remain dominated by those from the middle and upper class, particularly those who have received an elite education (Sutton Trust, 2005). This continuing link between status and education has caused some parents, who can afford independent education, to seek to improve their offspring's social status in this way, and this chapter has shown how this is borne out in practice. Individual ability and familial effort (with the struggle to pay school fees leading to cutbacks in other areas such as holiday or home improvements, see Johnson, 1987) is seen to lead to rewards, both educational (going to university) and social (increased career opportunities, as well as interaction with others from a similar or higher social class group).

It is significant here to return to my earlier discussion of the liminal state, in relation to the transitions being made by these young women. Their decisions whilst in this liminal state constructed them as middle class young women, with the achievement of this state seen as producing stability and a secure social location. Their construction of themselves as particular types of learning individuals (Brine and Waller, 2004; Davies *et al.*, 2001) led to their potential secured membership of their desired group, the middle class.

Whilst decisions of this type are clearly individualised, and based on family priorities, the liminal middle class at Midham could be identified as a distinct group, who held much in common. Their families had, similarly, made the decision that they could improve their situations through education, and saw independent education followed by university as the way to do this. Further to this, these students and their families' knowledge of the possibility of 'falling' back to their former position in the working class

(as can be seen by, for instance, Joanna's desire not to be 'on the lower level' as she perceived her parents to be) led them to try hard to avoid this fear being realised, thus necessitating a commitment to academic work for the student and encouragement (and continued fee-paying) for the parents.

It was certainly the case that they felt that they could not afford to simply 'go with the flow', and rather, that 'constant purposeful activity' (Allatt, 1993) was obligatory for the student and her family. Whilst methods of negotiating this were individualised, and required much work and planning by the student herself in seeking out advice from various available sources, the family remained an important part of the picture.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

On the whole, independent schools are an under-researched area (Walford, 2003; Gorard, 1997), with available studies which focus specifically on independent schools a rarity (Delamont, 1984a, 1989; Walford, 1986; Roker, 1993; Proweller, 1997). The majority of those studies that do include the independent sector tend to focus on highly selective schools and often on a small number of high achieving students (Walkerdine et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005), contrasting the educational decisions that these students make with those of working class students who attend maintained sector schools and colleges. Whilst the emergence of studies that consider the independent sector and the decisions made by those within it can be considered informative, the limitation of these studies to highly selective schools means that only a partial picture of the sector is evident in current research.

This thesis addresses this gap, providing a detailed study of student decision-making at post-16 and post-18 level in a non-selective school in the independent sector, which caters for students with a wide range of abilities. By focussing on a school where not all students were high academic achievers, social class selectivity has here been separated from academic selectivity, thus enabling a more comprehensive picture of the influential effect of social class on the decision-making process. Furthermore, by focussing on a single sex school, the effect of discourses of specifically

middle class femininity on educational decision-making processes could be further explored. In all, a picture has been provided of my respondents' development into gendered and classed decision-makers, drawing on discourses from their homes and schools to inform their agentic subjectivity.

The current study has made a significant contribution to this under-researched area. Key aspects of this contribution will be highlighted in this chapter, which brings together some of the key findings from my research at Midham School. Drawing on the previously available literature, it shows how the findings of this study support the assertions made by some authors in the field of educational decision-making, whereas other contentions are drawn into question in the light of these results. Moreover, the chapter reveals how this research makes a contribution to addressing significant gaps that were identified in currently available literature relating to educational decision-making.

In order to address this, in this chapter I take each of the key thematic areas on which this study has centred in turn: that is, (1) decision-making, (2) gender and (3) social class. With respect to each of these areas, some of the key debates and noteworthy gaps in current literature with respect to each area are summarised. Discussion in these sections is further concerned with the contribution made by findings from the research at Midham School to these debates. Following on from this, the final section of the chapter highlights original areas of this study, and further, makes suggestions for areas which require further exploration, and possible extensions of this research.

Decision-Making

Although studies of decision-making in the independent sector are available (Johnson, 1987; Gorard, 1997; Jackson and Bisset, 2005) these have a tendency to take as their focus the decisions made by parents to send their children to independent schools, with the young people themselves seen as having little agency of their own. Whilst it has been acknowledged by Gorard (1997) that children and young people are increasingly playing a role in school choice decisions in the independent sector, and studies of young people's choices at post-16 level in the maintained sector have shown the decision to be primarily made by the young person themselves (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ball *et al.*, 2000), studies of decisions at post-compulsory level that include those from independent schools tend to afford a prime role to the parent in this decision-making process (Reay *et al.*, 2005). However, there has been a new focus in recent years on children's and young people's subjective agency, placing them at the centre of research and valuing their thoughts and opinions on their own education (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 1999; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Hughes, 2004). Consequently, my decision to carry out a study of decision-making in the independent sector focussing on the decisions made by young people themselves can be seen as timely. It is notable that many of my interviewees felt that they had played an active role in making decisions about their own education. Whilst those who entered the school at a young age felt that their parents had made the decision for them, and in most cases, parents were seen as having ultimate authority over this decision on account

of their necessary financial backing, the young women tended to report a degree of involvement in decisions made even at this stage, with more extensive involvement as they got older.

The school's ethos was based upon adherence to a 'standard trajectory' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) through education, and this had a profound effect on the development of all its students into particular types of decision-making individual. Both Careers lessons and school marketing materials fostered the idea of progression along an academic based and middle class dominated educational trajectory. However, there was also recognition of the young women's growing autonomy and independence in this respect, progressing from childhood (where decisions would be largely made by parents) to young adulthood, where decisions were more autonomous and agentic. Discourses within the school pointed towards this growing independence, with institutional events such as Sixth Form taster days and Careers guidance centring around the young women taking the role of active, agentic decision-makers. At the stage of making decisions about post-compulsory education and university, the young women had, on the whole, taken the role of decision-making agents, taking responsibility for their own decisions, with parents' roles being more in advice, guidance and support rather than active instruction.

Indeed, the concept of agency has been key to this study, with the debate between structure and agency as an important consideration in relation to the young women's decision-making. In recent years, neo-liberalism, marketisation and choice have formed the dominant rhetoric of much educational policy, and this is based on the 'established market' of

independent schools (Gorard, 1998; Chubb and Moe, 1997; Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). These, in turn, have links to notions of individualism and agency (Beck, 1992), with theses emerging based upon economic rationalism and utility maximisation (Becker, 1977, 1991, 1996; Coleman and Fararo, 1992). The significance of structural factors such as social class is thus dismissed in favour of individuals acting in their own self-interest (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). However, several critiques of these individualised perspectives have been offered, including their lack of consideration of emotional factors or family ties (Archer, 2000), the assumption of the chooser making a detached and emotionless analysis of facts (Hughes, 2002a) and the fact that whilst those choosers who are unencumbered by structural constraints may see these as insignificant in decision-making, for others these factors are highly relevant (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005).

Versions of rational decision-making which include structural factors (Gambetta, 1987, Goldthorpe, 1996, 1998; Hatcher, 1998) appear more informative in this respect, and this is borne out in this study. Both the school (Chapters 3 and 4) and the family's background (Chapters 5 and 6) are shown to provide a significant influence in this respect, with discourses inherent in these locations framing the decisions that the young women made. Although these discourses had a strong framing effect on the decisions which the young women made, this is not to say that they could not be challenged: and whilst there were no observed examples of extreme rebellion against the prevalent discourse, some students did challenge this, for instance with their choice of course and institution (as can be seen from

the examples of Charlotte and Victoria from Chapter 3, and to an extent, Hayley from Chapter 6). On the whole, the decisions that these young women made could be considered to follow a process of reasoning and discernment between available options, as can be seen through the vignettes of the decision-making processes of three students, Victoria, Jessica and Harriet, in Chapter 3. However, for the young women from Midham School, these reasoned decisions were clearly delimited within a middle class-based framework, where progression to academic study at post-compulsory and Higher Education level was a tacitly conveyed natural step to take.

These findings challenge theses which posit the decline of class, at least in relation to the respondents in this particular study. Instead, a discourse-based perspective has been taken up here, which encompasses aspects of both structure and agency. Structural aspects relating to social class and gender have been shown to be mediated through discourses arising in both the school, and the home and family, and thus to shape these young women's development into individual subjective, agentic decision-makers. Whilst the vast majority of the young women educated at Midham School did end up at the final destination of university, their chosen types of university, course and subject differed widely, and this can again be attributed to their exposure to and take-up of different discourses. Thus assertions that have been made in earlier studies of educational decision-making regarding the homogeneity of middle class young women's educational trajectories (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Lucey, 2001) are rendered problematic in this regard.

Gender

Discourses occurring within the school were also significant with respect to gender, which was an extremely relevant structuring factor to many decisions occurring within Midham School. The young women's differential take-up of these gendered discourses had a significant effect on the decisions that they made, and what they perceived as possibilities for young women such as themselves.

Whilst in recent years, girls have been seen to have caught up with and overtaken boys in terms of academic results (Weiner *et al.*, 1997; Tinklin, 2003), there is still a considerable difference between the subjects and future careers chosen by girls and boys at post-16 level, even in the case of girls educated in single sex schools (Francis *et al.*, 2003). Single sex (girls) schools in the independent sector have, in their marketing, drawn heavily on their capacity to buck this trend, emphasising their high level of examination entries in traditionally male-dominated subjects (GSA, 2004).

However, findings from my research at Midham School show the situation to be more complicated than this. Indeed, the school could be seen to be located within a complex binary between a liberal feminist, equal opportunities-based discourse, and a concomitant discourse of traditional middle class femininity. This reinforces findings by Ball and Gewirtz (1997) in single sex schools in the maintained sector of education, and problematises the distinction drawn by Lee and Marks (1992) between girls' independent schools with traditional structures and those with opportunity-based structures. Whilst the marketing of the school foregrounded notions

of equality of opportunity rooted in discourses of liberal feminism, with emphasis laid on the opportunities afforded by a single sex school in terms of progression in traditionally male-dominated subjects, take-up of these subjects was limited, although those who did study them experienced significant encouragement. Conversely, the ethos of the school was dominated by an ‘ethic of care’ (Strachan, 1999) whereby the link between femininity and a caring, protective environment was reinforced, refuting the aggressive or competitive (more masculinised) behaviour which was considered to characterise their local ‘rival’, a highly academically-selective girls’ school. This brings forward the idea of diversity between girls’ schools in the independent sector, which can be related to their selective or non-selective status, stemming from the early origins of different schools as either ‘high schools’, based on boys’ boarding schools and teaching academic subjects to able students, or as more of a ‘finishing school’ type, focussing on teaching the ‘accomplishments’ to less able middle class girls (Delamont, 1989; Lee and Marks, 1992; Coffey and Delamont, 2001).

Although discourses of liberal feminism were evident within Midham School, this was clearly in an ameliorated form, and tended to be subsumed by discourses relating to a more traditional form of middle class femininity based around participation in particular kinds of extra-curricular activity. The emphasis on extra-curricular activities at Midham, and the school’s strong caring and protective ethos would appear to stem from its origins, as a small boarding school of the ‘finishing school’ type. It could be argued that the extra-curricular activities in which Midham heavily invested, such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, music, drama, ballet and

horse-riding, represent modern-day versions of the ‘accomplishments’. In this way, a link between the structural effects of gender and of social class is highlighted: by partaking in particular extra-curricular activities, the young women were imbued with particular types of middle class cultural capital. This was especially important for those from liminal middle class backgrounds, who may have less of this type of cultural capital on account of their own families’ origins not being in the middle class. Family investment in an independent education thus led to economic capital being exchanged for cultural and social capital (Ball, 2003), in order to set them up for a middle class future.

Social Class

Whilst Midham School, as an independent school with high fee levels, was clearly socially selective, it was not academically selective. Hence, in this study, it was possible to focus more clearly on the effect of social class on educational decision-making, without this being necessarily combined with high academic ability, unlike in other studies which have focussed predominantly on those attending academically selective independent schools (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2005). These studies must not be dismissed entirely, as they do advance useful discussion of how university choice-making can advantage certain groups of young people. Certainly, it is notable that with regard to school and university choice, this is not just a choice for the young people involved but they are also being chosen, with the educational institution itself (school or

university) as the ultimate arbiter of who they will (and will not) let in. Consequently, those who are better equipped for the decision-making process may be regarded as having the potential to make more effective choices, with independent schools purportedly having the expertise to prepare their students most effectively with respect to university choice (Pugsley, 2004). Furthermore, where parents and other family members have had experience of university (and particularly those universities of high status, such as Oxbridge) they have been regarded to be able to provide substantial guidance to their offspring when they come to make their own Higher Education choices (Reay et al, 2005; Walkerdine et al, 2001). The decision-making process has thus been perceived ostensibly to hold particular advantage for those from independent schools and from middle class backgrounds.

Academic studies have addressed this, focussing on how choice policies have tended to advantage particular groups of young people. At a school level, this can be attributed to the parental and wider family background (Gewirtz et al., 1995); at university level the school attended also would appear to come into play, with those from independent schools particularly advantaged (Pugsley, 2004; Reay et al., 2005).

However, it must be recognised that the picture that has been portrayed of those educated in the independent sector in certain aforementioned studies is necessarily partial, as evidenced by the results of my research at Midham. For the young women educated at Midham, going to university was not in all instances a case of following family tradition, but was often a new experience.

The greater diversity amongst those educated in independent schools as evidenced by studies by Pugsley (2004) and Delamont (1984 a and b, 1989) was more informative here in relation to those young women who attended Midham School. Those educated at Midham could be divided by their family educational and social class backgrounds into two groups, an established middle class whose history of middle classness was extensive and for whom going to university was a case of following family tradition, and a liminal middle class who occupied a less secure position, whose parents often had origins in the working class and who had little family experience of university.

Both of these groups utilised the independent education sector in different ways, whilst following trajectories that would appear quite similar (that is, from compulsory schooling, to the Sixth Form and then on to university). For those from established middle class backgrounds, the school acted to reinforce a future that was already known, with many of these students expressing that they had been aware all of their lives that they would go to university. This expectation, conveyed tacitly to the young women through discourses within their families and home lives, became almost ‘natural’ to them, with no alternatives being considered. However, their secure position in the middle class meant that their choice of an institution and course could be for reasons of enjoyment, social and leisure-based reasons. Their possession of large amounts of middle class cultural and social capital meant that high educational achievement was not necessarily important (Moi, 1999).

By contrast, those from liminal middle class backgrounds used the school as a way of securing and ensuring their continued location in the middle class. Their parents often had origins in the working class, and had not attended university, but they tended to be ambitious for their offspring, wanting them to have the education that they felt that they themselves had not had. What Allatt (1993) has termed 'constant purposeful activity' was necessitated on the part of these young women and their families in order to maintain their place in the middle class, and this included not only a good academic performance, but also considerable effort in relation to selecting an appropriate course and university. By using an independent school, with its concomitant ethos pointing towards university as an expectation for the majority of students, these young women and their families perceived that their futures as members of the middle class were secured.

Young women attending independent schools can thus be affirmed as more diverse than they have been previously portrayed. For those young women from Midham, their family histories and backgrounds in education differed widely, and this led to differences in familial discourses, even though ultimately, the majority of their families wanted and expected their daughters to go to university. Parents whose background was in the established middle class wanted their daughters to follow in their footsteps to university and a professional career, whereas those from more liminal middle class backgrounds tended to want their offspring to have a better education than they did, feeling that this would advantage them. Hence, the dominant discourses relating to educational decision-making can be seen to differ between these two fractions of the middle class. For instance, with

regard to utilisation of school resources relating to university choice and decision-making, sources such as the Careers room and individual Careers guidance interviews tended to be employed more by those from liminal middle-class backgrounds, whereas those from more established middle-class backgrounds were able to gain some of the information which they needed from their families. This further indicates a point of agreement between my study and others that signal the diversity and fractional nature of the middle class (Crompton, 1992; Savage, 1995, 2003). Further studies in the field of educational decision-making would be well to bear this intra-school diversity in mind, rather than taking school type as a proxy for social class background (as can be seen in Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Concluding Discussion – limitations and possible extensions to my study

Overall, this study has shown how the subjective, agentic decision-making of the young women educated at Midham was informed by structural factors of gender, social class and also academic ability, stemming from discourses occurring within their school and home lives. Indeed, the decision by a family that a young woman should be educated in an independent school not only reveals an expression of family priorities and expectations, but also places her in an institutional situation where certain discourses are dominant in relation to educational decision-making. These, in turn, reveal to the young woman the appropriateness of various decisions to her own structural location, and thus inform the decisions that she makes.

In this section, I will draw together some of the key analytical issues which are raised in my thesis, considering both their strengths and their

potential limitations. Discussion will centre on the original contribution which my study has made to academic debate, whilst acknowledging the limitations which the study holds. Furthermore, I will consider the areas in which the study could be extended, in order to provide a greater insight into the independent sector of education, and decisions made by those young people educated within it.

As has been shown in the earlier part of this chapter, this study has provided an original contribution to several academic debates within the fields of structure versus agency, social class, gender and educational decision-making. However, the limitations of this study in offering a resolution to these debates must necessarily be raised. The first key area which I will discuss here is the structure versus agency debate, in which my study has shown how the dualism between these can be overcome by adopting a discourse-based position, which shows how young women take up different discourses to inform their subjective agency, dependent on their own structural position. These gendered and classed discourses were shown to be highly significant to the young women's subjective decision-making with regard to issues such as their university destination and chosen subject of study. Thus a significant strength of this approach can be seen in that it recognises the possibility of difference and self-direction in the decision-making process, rather than seeing the young women as being propelled mindlessly towards choices which are pre-ordained by their structural position and background (as can be the case with structural approaches based on socialisation), whilst still acknowledging the powerful effect of such structural aspects. However, it is important to note that discourses are

merely strings of language (Gee, 1997), which are generated by people, and thus do not have agency in and of themselves (Hughes, 2002b).

Furthermore, attention must be drawn here to the problematic nature of the language of dualism, and the implications of this for attempts to transcend binaries (such as structure / agency). Plumwood (1993, cited by Hughes, 2002a) draws emphasis to the way in which binaries are ever-present in language (such as black / white; male / female), resulting in our thinking being structured by dualism. Dualism is identified as more than a relation of dichotomy or difference and more than a simple hierarchical relationship: rather, dualism acts to express a hierarchical relationship, whereby cultural concepts and identities are constructed such in a way that renders the two terms unequal (*ibid.*). This problem can be transformed by deconstructing the dualism by employing a new, third concept (such as that of discourse) meaning that not only is this binaried thinking subverted, but the knowledge of the potentially hierarchical positioning of the dualism and the meanings behind it are revealed. The use of a discourse-based perspective thus attempts to overcome the dualism between structure and agency by the use of an approach which encompasses both structure and agency, rather than seeing this as an issue of adopting either one perspective or the other (Hughes, 2002b). This is effective, but means that the focus on the dualism of structure and agency as separate concepts is maintained rather than transcended.

The conceptualisation of a discursive position which maintains the two terms of structure and agency could also be seen as problematic in that this means that little allowance is made for anomalous behaviour, as

decisions remain restricted by structural factors. Whilst none of the young women made decisions that were strongly contrary to what was being reinforced to them in discourses from the home and family, there were examples of young women who went against dominant discourse in some way (for example Charlotte and Hayley choosing A levels respectively in Physical Education and Psychology, against the wishes of their parents; Victoria applying to the University of Bristol against the advice and guidance of her teachers). These decisions could, however, be seen as only mildly anomalous, as whilst they were acting against the dominant discourses within their families and / or school, they were still following what can be seen as a standard path for middle class young women by choosing to study A levels (even if in subjects that were not initially approved of by their parents) and applying to university. However, it is necessary to consider possible hypothetical situations here: what if a student had, in fact, decided to leave the school at the age of 16 and seek employment, or had found herself to be pregnant during her time in the Sixth Form and decided to leave school for this reason? Whilst neither of these scenarios occurred at Midham to my knowledge, they are not outside the realms of possibility. It is important, therefore, to note, that this can be explained within post-structuralist, discourse-based perspectives through the term resistance, a concept which has been employed by Francis (1998) to illustrate why some students, both male and female, resist socialisation into particular gendered roles and choices within education. By noting the possibility of resistance amongst those young women at Midham, either in a small way as my examples from my research show, or in a major way, as in

my hypothetical cases, my discourse-based position is thus rendered more inclusive of a wider range of possibilities, without losing sight of the take-up and adoption of particular discourses as being the norm within this institution and for these young women.

It is therefore crucial to note that there are some limitations and sources of contention within the discourse-based approach which I adopted in my analysis. Whilst the dualistic categories of structure and agency are not removed by analyses of this type, my use of a discourse-based perspective enabled aspects of both structure and agency to be seen to be influential on these young women's decision-making processes, thus providing valuable insights into how decisions were made.

Another key theme arising from my study is that of intra-class distinctions and difference within the middle class. My study has cast focus on the middle class themselves, rather than merely presenting them as a massified and disparaging contrast to a valorised working class, a critique of earlier studies in this field raised by Power (2001). Moreover, it has widened social class-based debates with respect to educational decision-making, by considering the diversity of those who go to independent schools and of the middle class as a whole. Indeed, assertions of the similarity of the trajectories of middle class young women who attend independent schools (such as Walkerdine et al., 2001; Lucey, 2001) are rendered problematic by my study, on account of the finding that for the young women at Midham, although their ultimate destination of university may have been similar, how they got there and the influences on the decisions they made within this process differed significantly depending on

the discourses that were available to them and which of these discourses they chose to take up and / or reject. By showing the middle class to be a group with considerable internal diversity, the study additionally adds to current debates surrounding new, wider and more diverse theories of class, advanced by authors such as Crompton (1992), Savage (1995; 2000; 2003) and Devine (2004).

It is, however, important to provide critical reflection here on the conceptualisation of class used in my thesis, particularly my grouping of the students at Midham into the two categories of the established middle class and liminal middle class. As mentioned previously, this categorisation draws attention to the diversity within the middle class, both on an intra-class and intra-school level. The use of the concept of the ‘liminal middle class’ is particularly significant here. Whilst this term has been employed by Brooks (2005) in relation to young people educated in a maintained sector Sixth Form college who were the first in their families to progress on to Higher Education, and Reay *et al.*, (2005) have employed a similar concept of the ‘novitiate middle class’ (discussed in chapter 1), this concept has not been used before in reference to the independent sector, with the assumption tending to be made that these are young people with extensive family history and experience of the independent sector of education and of Higher Education. Its use in my thesis to apply to a significant proportion of the students who have been educated in an independent school opens up a new area for consideration, raising the significant issue of families utilising independent schools in order that their children can maintain or improve their social class position and thus secure their own and their family’s place

in the middle class. Thus an extremely significant area for potential future study (and a problematic oversight in previous studies of this type) has been revealed here.

However, the limitations of this conceptualisation of class must also be noted here. It is important to note that the concepts of the established and liminal middle class were developed in this study as analytic devices through which the young women's decision-making could be explored and disseminated, but that these categories should not become immutable and inflexible. The variation amongst students within these groups is important to note, as are the similarities which were observed between students who were defined in my study as belonging to different categories.

Indeed, within each category there were significant differences between students, highlighted in this study through the provision of vignettes of individual students within my data chapters. Although they held various characteristics in common, the students within each categorisation also had significant differences. For instance, within the established middle class, some students' parents owned their own businesses, whereas others had professional careers in areas such as law or finance. What these students shared was their secure and well-established background within the middle class and their knowledge that this background was assured and would be maintained without significant struggle, and this was therefore used as the basis of my categorisation: but this is not to say that another researcher studying the same young women would not choose to categorise them in a different way.

Students also sometimes had a lot in common with those who were categorised differently: for instance, Suzanne (established middle class) and Victoria (liminal middle class) both had a parent who had returned to education in recent years as a mature student. However, other differences in their families with respect to their educational and social class histories, and the current occupational status, led to them being located in different middle class fractions in my analysis. Again, this example shows the potential for grouping the young women at Midham in different ways, and the fluidity of the grouping which I used, illustrating that the categorisation of the established and liminal middle classes should not be regarded as fixed, nor should it be considered that the two groups did not have aspects in common as well as things which were distinctive.

Moreover, if my categorisation were expanded to apply to students or families in other contexts, it would inevitably be cross-cut by other forms of categorisation such as gender and ethnicity: the fact that my research participants were all white and all female may have to an extent allowed for an element of simplification which would not have occurred in a different sample population. A wider study, encompassing several schools with more diverse student populations (in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion etc.), might allow for the study to be further developed in this connection and allow for a stronger and more differentiated categorisation to be built up.

Indeed, it is significant here to consider areas in which the study could be extended, in order that its analysis and findings could be confirmed or enhanced. On the basis of this study of a single school, the conclusions which can be drawn must necessarily be seen as tentative, with further

research holding the potential to reinforce and extend my findings. For instance, in relation to issues of gender, in Chapter 4 my study highlighted the presence of an ameliorated form of liberal feminism at Midham, alongside a more traditional feminine discourse which (it was considered) could lead to a culture of dependency amongst the young women educated there. Further study focussing on additional girls' schools in the independent sector would enable establishment of whether this is something common to all girls' schools or whether Midham is unique in this respect. Also in this connection, it would be informative to compare selective and non-selective independent schools for girls, to see whether this makes a difference in terms of the presence of discourses of dependence and of liberal feminist discourses. This additionally raises questions relating to single sex education as a whole, in the maintained as well as the independent sector, which again could prompt more comparative study focussing on differences between the sectors. Further study of discourses within single sex schools could lend strength to debates about the positives and negatives of single sex education.

Furthermore, my thesis has raised issues relating to the diversity of the independent sector and its users. These issues have included the range of levels of attainment by students within the school, the variety of destinations and courses taken up by the young women leaving Midham, and the heterogeneity of their family educational backgrounds and histories. This area could, again, be built on in further research, with similar studies to mine focussing on different schools within the independent sector offering the potential to gain increased knowledge of the diversity of the sector and

its users, and raising questions about how the sector is currently represented, both in academic discourse as well as wider contexts (for example, in the media). Moreover, additional work focussing on the parents and families of those who attend independent schools, and their own educational histories, experiences and decisions about their own and their children's education (for example through interview or detailed questionnaire studies) would enable a more in-depth exploration of issues relating to the family. Additionally, studying families who had the financial wherewithal to utilise the independent sector of education but chose not to for whatever reason could also inform work on the diversity of the middle class. All of these would further enable a clearer and more detailed conceptualisation to be built up of the different class fractions within the middle class.

Finally, a more in-depth study following students over the entire two years which they spent in the Sixth Form, either by interviewing the same students every half-term, or by asking the students to keep diaries relating to their decision-making, would have allowed for more detailed analysis of their decision-making processes, and enabled observation of how their decisions changed over time. However, this was not possible at Midham on account of constraints on my time and the degree of access I was allowed to the school and students (as was noted in my discussion of methods in chapter 2, the time-period in which I was allowed to conduct interviews was relatively restricted in order that minimal disruption to students' study time was caused, so if I had requested to carry out multiple interviews over the course of two years, it is very likely that this request would have been refused).

Thus in conclusion, this study has provided an attempt to analyse issues of gender and social class, and how discourses relating to these occurring within the school and home impacted on the decisions made by a group of Sixth Form students within a non-selective independent school for girls. By focussing on this rarely-studied group, new insights have been gained into these young women's decision-making, illustrating both similarities and diversities between them as a group, and showing how they engage with, participate in and occasionally challenge available discourses. Moreover, the recognition of the middle class as a fractioned rather than homogeneous whole, and the evidence of considerable intra-school diversity (in terms of family histories and educational backgrounds) within Midham School holds the potential for a wider conceptualisation of what it means to be a young female, educated in an independent school and making decisions about the future. Finally, recognition of the advantages bestowed by an independent school education need not be a reason to deride these schools and those who utilise them, nor to dismiss them in research: rather, close study of these schools and the discourses occurring within them can be seen to provide valuable insights into issues of gender, class and decision-making which have the potential to be informative to research in the educational field on a wider scale.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter to Mrs. Sheila Holmes-Brown, Head of Midham School

25th February 2004

Mrs. Sheila Holmes-Brown
Midham School
Town
Postcode

Dear Mrs. Holmes-Brown,

My name is Helen Marson. I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick, where I am currently planning the research fieldwork for my proposed doctoral thesis on 'Choice and Independent Schooling'.

Accordingly, I write to enquire whether it might be possible to for me to consider Midham School as a data collection site within the context of my research design, given the school's status within the Independent sector and its proximity to the University.

If granted access to the school, I would, of course, ensure confidentiality and anonymity in terms of data dissemination. In addition, I would be more than happy to discuss the possibility of the results of my research being utilised by the school in some way.

I would be most grateful of the opportunity to hold further discussions with you on this matter. Indeed, if you think that it might be feasible for me to access the school, please do feel free to contact me, either by email (h.r.marson@warwick.ac.uk) or by letter to my department.

Thank you very much for your time and attention. I hope to hear from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Marson
PhD Student, Department of Sociology
University of Warwick

Appendix 2: Upper Sixth Questionnaire

**Voices and Choices in the Independent Sector
of Education – Student Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is about the choices which you have made, and are about to make, about your education and your future. All the answers are confidential: you will not be identified by name when this research is written up.
Please take the time to read and answer the questions carefully. Your help is very much appreciated.

Section A: About you and your family

1. When did you join Midham School?

Junior School Year 7 Year 9 6th Form
Other (Please state).....

If you moved to Midham School for Sixth Form, which school did you attend previously?
.....
.....

2. Who, in your opinion, made the decision for you to come to the school?

You
Your parents
You and your parents together
Someone else (Please state).....

3. Did your parent(s) attend University or College?

	Mum	Dad
Yes, went to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, went to a Further Education College	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 16	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 18	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please state).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Do you have any older brothers or sisters?

Yes How many brothers? sisters?

No

5. If yes, do they / did they attend University or College? (Tick all that apply)

Yes, go to / went to University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, go to / went to a Further Education College	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 16	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 18	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/> (Please state)
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section B: Staying on / moving to this school for the Sixth Form

6. Did you consider any other options for post-16, other than Midham School?

Yes (Go to question 7)
No (Go to Question 10)

7. If you **considered other options for post-16**, which of the following did you consider? (Tick all that apply)

Moving to another school (Independent)
Moving to another school (State)
Staying at previous school (for those who moved to this school for Sixth Form)
Moving to College (A Levels)
Moving to College (Vocational course)
Getting a job
Other (Please state).....

8a. If you **considered other options for post-16**, who helped you to decide to stay on / move to Midham School? (Please tick the box which corresponds to how helpful you think they were – 1 is “not helpful at all”, 5 is “very helpful”. If you did not receive any advice from this person / group of people, please tick the box at the end of the row).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

8b. Who do you feel had the biggest influence on this decision? Why? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

9. If you **considered other options for post-16**, which events helped you to decide to stay on? (Please tick the box as before, 1 is “not helpful at all”, 5 is “very helpful”. Tick the box at the end if you did not attend or use this).

	1	2	3	4	5	Did not use
Sixth Form Open Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Talking to Sixth Formers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Subject Taster Days	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>					
One to one Careers sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Connexions Interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (Please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Go to Question 11

10. If you **did not consider any other options post-16**, why was this? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....

11a. **To be answered by all:** Who helped you to **choose your A/S and A2 Subjects?** (Please tick the box which corresponds to how helpful they were, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end of the row if you did not receive any advice from this person / group of people).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

11b. Who do you consider had the biggest influence on your decisions regarding your AS and A2 subjects? Why? (Please continue on another sheet of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

12. Which of the following events helped you to **choose your A/S and A2 Subjects?** (Please tick the box as before, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end if you did not attend or use this).

	1	2	3	4	5	Did not use
Sixth Form Open Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Talking to Sixth Formers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Subject Taster Days	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>					
One to one Careers sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Connexions Interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (Please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

13. Do you have any further comments about your time in the Sixth Form at the Midham School? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Section C: Choices at 18 plus

14. What do you want to do when you leave Midham School, at age 18?

- University / College (Higher Education) (Go to question 15)
College (Further Education) (Go to question 15)
Employment (Go to question 18)
Other (Please state) (Go to question 18)

15a. If you hope to go to University or College, please fill in the grid below with details of your applications.

Name of University or College	Course	Offer / rejection?

15b. Which university or college is your first choice?
.....

16. Are you considering any of the following:

Living at home and attending a local University or College?

Yes No

Studying for a degree part-time?

Yes No

Taking a gap year to travel?

Yes No

Taking a gap year to earn money for University? Yes No

17a. Tuition fees of up to £3000 per year will be charged for Higher Education courses from 2006 onwards. If these fees had applied to you, do you think that it would have made a difference to the choices which you have made?

Yes No

17b. If yes, please tick which of the following you would have done:

- I would have lived at home and attended a local university
I would have studied for a degree part-time
I would have taken a gap year to earn money for university
I would have studied a different course
I would not have gone to university

18. If you intend to **go into employment, or do something else**, please give details here: (Continue on an extra sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....

19a. (**To be answered by all**) Which of the following have been helpful in making decisions about what to do when you leave school? (Please tick the box as before, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end of the row if you did not receive any advice from this person / group of people).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Teacher (one to one)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers teacher (in lessons)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>					

19b. Who do you consider had the biggest influence on this decision? (Please continue on another sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....
.....
.....

20. Finally, what is your ethnic group?

White: Of British Origin Of Irish Origin Of Other Origin (please state.....)

Mixed: White and Black Caribbean White and Black African White and Asian Other (Please state)

Black or Black British: Of African Origin Of Caribbean Origin Of Other Origin (please state.....)

Asian or Asian British: Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi

Chinese, Chinese British or Other Origin: Chinese Other Origin (Please state).....

21. If there is anything else which I have not asked about, but which you think is relevant, please write it here (continue on an extra sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Some Sixth Form students have already filled in forms saying that they will take part in interviews with me about their choices in education. If you are one of these people, please tick here

If you have not already let me know, but would like to take part in a short interview about your choices, please fill in your name and form here.

Name.....Form.....

I will be in touch with all of you after Christmas to arrange a convenient time for the interviews to take place.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Appendix 3: Lower Sixth Questionnaire

Voices and Choices in the Independent Sector of Education – Student Questionnaire

This questionnaire is about the choices which you have made, and are about to make, about your education and your future. All the answers are confidential: you will not be identified by name when this research is written up.
Please take the time to read and answer the questions carefully. Your help is very much appreciated.

Section A: About you and your family

1. When did you join Midham School?

Junior School Year 7 Year 9 6th Form
Other (Please state).....

If you moved to Midham School for Sixth Form, which school did you attend previously?
.....

2. Who, in your opinion, made the decision for you to come to the school?

You
Your parents
You and your parents together
Someone else (Please state).....

3. Did your parent(s) attend University or College?

	Mum	Dad
Yes, went to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, went to a Further Education College	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 16	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 18	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please state).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Do you have any older brothers or sisters?

Yes How many brothers? sisters?

No

5. If yes, do they / did they attend University or College? (Tick all that apply)

Yes, go to / went to University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes, go to / went to a Further Education College	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 16	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, left education at 18	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/> (Please state)
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section B: Staying on / moving to this school for the Sixth Form

6. Did you consider any other options for post-16, other than Midham School?

Yes (Go to question 7)
No (Go to Question 10)

7. If you **considered other options for post-16**, which of the following did you consider? (Tick all that apply)

- Moving to another school (Independent)
Moving to another school (State)
Staying at previous school (for those who moved to this school for Sixth Form)
Moving to College (A Levels)
Moving to College (Vocational course)
Getting a job
Other (Please state).....

8a. If you **considered other options for post-16**, who helped you to decide to stay on / move to Midham School? (Please tick the box which corresponds to how helpful you think they were – 1 is “not helpful at all”, 5 is “very helpful. If you did not receive any advice from this person / group of people, please tick the box at the end of the row).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

8b. Who do you feel had the biggest influence on this decision? Why? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....

9. If you **considered other options for post-16**, which events helped you to decide to stay on? (Please tick the box as before, 1 is “not helpful at all”, 5 is “very helpful” Tick the box at the end if you did not attend or use this).

	1	2	3	4	5	Did not use
Sixth Form Open Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Talking to Sixth Formers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Subject Taster Days	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>					
One to one Careers sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Connexions Interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (Please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Go to Question 11

10. If you **did not consider any other options post-16**, why was this? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....

11a. To be answered by all: Who helped you to **choose your A/S and A2 Subjects?** (Please tick the box which corresponds to how helpful they were, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end of the row if you did not receive any advice from this person / group of people).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

11b. Who do you consider had the biggest influence on your decisions regarding your AS and A2 subjects? Why? (Please continue on another sheet of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....

12. Which of the following events helped you to **choose your A/S and A2 Subjects?** (Please tick the box as before, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end if you did not attend or use this).

	1	2	3	4	5	Did not use
Sixth Form Open Evening	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Talking to Sixth Formers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Subject Taster Days	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>					
One to one Careers sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Connexions Interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other (Please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>					

13. Do you have any further comments about your time in the Sixth Form at Midham School? (Please continue on another piece of paper if required)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Section C: Choices at 18 plus

14. What do you want to do when you leave Midham School, at age 18?

University / College (Higher Education)	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Go to question 15)
College (Further Education)	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Go to question 15)
Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Go to question 15)
Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Go to question 18)
Other (Please state)	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Go to question 18)

15a. If you are considering going to University or College, please write down the courses and institutions you are considering at the moment.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

15b. At the moment, which university or college is your first choice?

.....

16. Are you considering any of the following:

Living at home and attending a local University or College?

Yes No

Studying for a degree part-time?

Yes No

Taking a gap year to travel?

Yes No

Taking a gap year to earn money for University? Yes No

17a. Tuition fees of up to £3000 per year will be charged for Higher Education courses from 2006 onwards. Do you think that this will make any difference to your choices?

Yes No

17b. If yes, please tick which of the following you will do:

I will live at home and attend a local university

I will study for a degree part time

I will take a gap year to earn money for university

I will study a different course

18. If you are considering **going into employment, or doing something else**, please give details here: (Continue on an extra sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....
.....
.....

19a. (**To be answered by all**) Which of the following have been helpful so far in making decisions about what to do when you leave school? (Please tick the box as before, 1 is "not helpful at all", 5 is "very helpful". Tick the box at the end of the row if you have not received any advice from this person / group of people).

	1	2	3	4	5	No advice
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>					
One to one Careers sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers lessons	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Careers Advisor (Connexions)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (at school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Friends (outside school)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>					

19b. Who do you consider has had the biggest influence on the choices you will make at 18-plus, so far? (Please continue on another sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....
.....
.....

20. Finally, what is your ethnic group?

White: Of British Origin Of Irish Origin Of Other Origin (please state.....)

Mixed: White and Black Caribbean White and Black African White and Asian Other (Please state)

Black or Black British: Of African Origin Of Caribbean Origin Of Other Origin (please state.....)

Asian or Asian British: Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi

Chinese, Chinese British or Other Origin: Chinese Other Origin (Please state).....

21. If there is anything else which I have not asked about, but which you think is relevant, please write it here (continue on an extra sheet of paper if needed)

.....
.....
.....
.....

Some Sixth Form students have already filled in forms saying that they will take part in interviews with me about their choices in education. If you are one of these people, please tick here

If you have not already let me know, but would like to take part in a short interview about your choices, please fill in your name and form here.

Name..... Form.....

I will be in touch with all of you after Christmas to arrange a convenient time for the interviews to take place.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Appendix 4: List of Midham School Staff Participating in Individual Interviews

Name of member of staff	Specialism	Date of interview
Kathryn Williams	Careers / Geography	1/10/2004
Veronica Smalley	Head of Upper Fifth	14/10/2004
Pauline Denham	Head of Sixth Form	11/11/2004
Linda Johnson	Marketing Coordinator	14/10/2004

All names are pseudonyms, for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality.

These are the dates of my initial, formal interviews with members of Midham School's staff. However, I also spoke more informally to these members of staff, particularly to Kathryn Williams, on several other occasions during my time at Midham.

Appendix 5: Questions for Teachers from Midham School

Early Careers lessons / Decision-making

- How early in pupils' school lives do you begin careers' education?
- What kind of things do you do?
- What about when they're choosing their GCSE options?
- Do the girls tend to have particular careers or A Levels in mind when they're picking their GCSEs, or earlier?

Advice for pupils on Sixth Form options

- What kind of advice do you give to pupils who are considering their sixth form options?
- How does the school help pupils with decision-making at 16 plus?
- Is it usually expected that most pupils will stay on at the school after age 16?
- Do most stay on?
- Does the school / parents / pupils themselves assume they will stay on?
- What do girls who do not stay on at the school for sixth form usually do instead?
- Do many girls move to the school for sixth form from other schools?
- Where are they usually moving from- state or independent sector?
- Who do you find makes the decision for the pupil to stay on, move to the school, or move elsewhere- parents or pupils?
- Do you think that pupils / parents are choosing the sixth form, that is choosing to stay on at Midham or moving to the school from elsewhere, with particular universities or careers in mind?
- Do you find that this changes over their time in the sixth form?
- Do you think that they pick their AS and A2 level options with this in mind?

Marketing the school

- How do you go about "selling" the sixth form, both to current and to prospective pupils, and to their parents?
- Do you have specific open days, options evenings etc. for prospective sixth formers?
- What do you think is the ethos of the school, particularly of the sixth form?
- How would you say that this attracts pupils and parents? (to choose the school, or to stay on for sixth form).

Social factors

- Do you think that as an all-girls' school, Midham School is any different to other schools in terms of pupil choices / careers / destinations?
- Do you think that pupils' ethnic background ever influences choices (about careers, A Levels etc.)?
- Does decision-making vary by whether the parent(s) have been to University themselves?

Destinations at 18 plus

What are the usual destinations for school leavers at 18? University / college / jobs?

How does the school help with decisions about these destinations, on a formal and informal level?

What kind of courses / careers do school-leavers generally aim for?

Is there anything else which I have not mentioned, which you would like to tell me?

Appendix 6: List of Midham School Students Participating in Small Group Interviews

Names of students	Year group	Date of interview
Isabel and Olivia	Lower Sixth	01/02/2005
Gemma and Louise	Lower Sixth	01/02/2005
Eleanor and Kerry	Upper Sixth	01/02/2005
Charlotte and Joanna	Lower Sixth	02/02/2005
Allie, Rachael and Suzanne	Upper Sixth	04/02/2005
Nicole	Upper Sixth	04/02/2005
Harriet, Jessica and Victoria	Upper Sixth	04/02/2005
Beth, Lucy and Rebecca	Lower Sixth	11/02/2005
Hayley and Lauren	Lower Sixth	11/02/2005
Jane and Jenny	Lower Sixth	11/02/2005

All names are pseudonyms, for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality.

Appendix 7: Questions for Sixth Formers at Midham School

Joining the school

- For how long have you attended Midham School?
- Who chose the school- you / your parents?
- Why did you choose Midham?
- Do you think that you would still make the same decision today?

Staying on / moving to Midham for Sixth Form

- How did you make the decision to stay on at the school for sixth form?
- Did you consider any other options or was it an automatic choice?
- Who helped you with this decision? - Parents? Family? Friends?
- Did you know anyone who left at 16? Why do you think that some people left at 16?
- What advice did you get from the school regarding sixth form options?
- what did you think of the advice you were given / open days and option talks?
- if you attended any open days elsewhere, how did they compare to Midham?

(For sixth formers previously educated elsewhere) Who made the decision for you to move to Midham for sixth form? You or your parents?

Subject choice

- What subjects are you studying at AS / A2 Level?
- Why did you choose these subjects?
- Did you choose with a particular university or career goal in mind?
- Did anyone help you to choose your options? Who?

Post-18 decisions

What are you thinking of doing after A Levels?

- Have you made a decision about this yet?
 - who has helped you with this decision?
 - (If considering university) Which universities / courses are you considering applying for / have you applied for?
 - (If don't want to / might not want to go to university) – what do you want to do instead?
 - Why this and not university?
- (For all) – has anyone in your family ever been to university? Do you think that this has influenced your choices?*
- What help and support have you had from your family in making university / career decisions?
 - Are they happy with the choices you've made?

School Ethos

- What do you think is the ethos of the school, particularly the sixth form?

Anything else?

Is there anything else which I haven't mentioned, which you wish to tell me about?

Appendix 8: Student Form

Voices and Choices in Independent Schools

Midham School

I would like to take part in this research project.

Name

Form

Free periods or lunchtimes when would be available for interview / focus group (please write in times)

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

I would like, if possible, to participate in a focus group with the following people (up to three people)

1.....

2.....

3.....

OR if you have no preference about who is in the same focus group with you, please tick here

Please hand this form in to the folder in the Sixth Form tutors' office, by Friday 12th November.

Appendix 9: Letter to Parents about Research

Dear Parent,

My name is Helen Marson. I am a PhD student from the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick, preparing a thesis on *Voices and Choices in the Independent Sector of Education*. My interest in this area arose from my own experiences of being educated in the independent sector, and from research which I conducted for a Master's Degree in the Sociology of Education at the University of Warwick in 2001/2. The aims of my current research are to allow young people to express their views and opinions about their education in independent schools, and to explore the processes through which choices of these schools are made. I am also interested in how young people make decisions about their education and future careers at age sixteen and over. This research is important because very little is known, sociologically, about issues of choice in the independent sector and, in particular, it is rare to focus on the perspectives of young people themselves in such research.

I will be attending Midham School to give a short talk about my research, on Tuesday 9th November. Following on from my talk, I will be asking the students whether they would be willing to partake in my research. Their commitment would be a short (approximately 20 minute) individual interview, followed by participation in a focus group interview.

These interviews will focus on:

The role of pupil(s) and parent(s) in choice processes.

Reasons for choosing the independent sector.

Reasons for choosing to stay on at this particular school, or to move to the school, for Sixth Form.

Plans for the future in terms of education and employment.

The choice about whether or not to participate in these interviews will be left up to the student, as participation is entirely voluntary. For those who wish to participate, a form is attached to this letter, to be filled in and either handed to myself, or otherwise placed in the labelled box which I will put in the Sixth Form block.

This research is conducted within the guidelines of the British Sociological Association (www.britsoc.co.uk). In this respect, confidentiality and anonymity are assured. For example, all names, of students, teachers and the school, will be changed in the writing up of results. Interview data will only be seen by me, and, on occasion, by my supervisors Dr. Andrew Parker and Dr. Christina Hughes at the University of Warwick.

If you wish to discuss this further, or if you or your daughter have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me, either by email (h.r.marson@warwick.ac.uk) or by writing to me at the address below. Thank you very much for your time.

Yours sincerely,
Helen Marson

Appendix 10: Why Higher Education? – Taken From a Handout Given Out
in a Careers Lesson at Midham School

Why Higher Education?

More and more jobs require a degree for entry and promotion

The range of employers recruiting people who have undertaken Higher Education is increasing

It has been estimated by the CBI that of all jobs available, 70% require a substantial quantity of ‘cerebral’ skills that can only be developed through Higher Education

Graduates are adaptable to change

The percentage of graduates in responsible, senior management positions is increasing (and these positions are usually the best paid)

Higher Education develops:

- Subject Knowledge
- Independence
- Ability to learn
- Constructive thinking
- Ability to work without close supervision
- Organisational skills
- Communication skills
- Social skills

Higher Education offers the opportunity to:

- Achieve your full academic potential, possibly up to post-doctoral level;
- Develop your interpersonal and professional skills and so achieve your career goals;
- Realise your full personal and social potential, including sporting, recreational and cultural ambitions, possibly including travel;
- Take advantage of one of the best ‘clubs’ in the world, the Student Union
- Experience a completely ‘open’ environment, free of dogma, domination and discrimination;
- Make life-lasting friendships and relationships

And if you make the right choices
Undergo what could be one of the most enjoyable, exciting and rewarding experiences of your life!

What are the drawbacks to Higher Education?

If you don't address all of the issues regarding your choice of Higher Education course, you may become disillusioned, depressed and demoralised about your studies

Increasingly, it is financially more difficult to undertake Higher Education

You have to remain relatively poor for a longer period of time

You may have to take out a student loan (the average student debt on graduation is now £12,000)

The support and consolation of your home environment may not be directly available to you

You may lose touch with some of your old friends and well-established close relationships can break down

For some, the new found freedom and lack of external discipline may possibly disrupt studies (i.e. too much partying and not enough work)

Appendix 11: Timetable of Open Day Events

Welcome to
**The Midham School
Open Evening**

7th October 2004
6.00-8.30pm

6.00-8.00pm	Music in the Reception Area and Music Room
6.30-8.00pm	Euro Café in The Dining Room
6.30-7.30pm	Form tutors available for consultation in the Garden Block
6.45pm	The Headteacher, Mrs. Holmes-Brown, will speak to prospective parents in the Common Room in the Sixth Form Centre.
6.30-7.00pm	Drama: Bugsy Malone rehearsal in New Hall.
7.00-8.00pm	Drama: Bugsy Malone rehearsal in Performing Arts Studio
7.00pm	
7.30pm	B.A.G.A. Gym display in the Gym
8.00pm	
7.00-8.00pm	Badminton Training and Tournament in the New Hall

7.30pm	The Headteacher, Mrs. Holmes-Brown, will speak to prospective parents in the Common Room in the Sixth Form Centre (Repeat)
--------	--

You are invited to visit classrooms throughout the school to see a range of activities, demonstrations and displays of pupils' work.

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