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An ethnographic case study exploring how "most-able, least-likely" young people form their Higher Education aspiration

by

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank my daughter, Liana, who has patiently, excitedly and proudly watched Mummy be a student now all 11 years of her life. Maybe soon we can consider getting a pet!

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Declaration

This thesis is my own work. No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Preface

When I started this PhD process, I underestimated how emotionally-demanding and mentally-explorative for me, it would prove to be. Shortly after beginning my official "writing- up" period, I became hesitant to write anything tangible. My mind became increasingly filled with words I could not organise on a page. In an effort to combat my growing apprehension, I began to articulate my writing reluctance. I realised that I was struggling to write my thesis with conviction because being a young, black female who aspires to the Academy had proved to be a double-edged sword.

Echoing Serrant-Green (2002:30) on the "...contradictions and responsibilities faced by a black researcher working in black and minority ethnic communities", I felt unwittingly positioned as an "expert" on all "issues" faced by those from black and minority ethnic groups in education; with all the negative ramifications this elicits, some well-meaning, others less so. This was whilst also dealing with the personal challenges that come from feeling like a living embodiment at the intersection of race, class, gender and attainment. My writing was partially stunted by this realisation. Writing, for me, is vulnerability and vulnerability is just not a luxury afforded often to the young, black, gay, doctoral-researching, unemployed, single mothers like me. Upon articulating my apprehension, vulnerability and reluctance, it re-affirmed why I originally began this mammoth undertaking; to share and maximise the voices of some individuals whose stories often go untold, unheard, even ignored at research, practice or policy level within the Higher Education landscape.

Abstract

The concept of HE aspiration is rarely problematised in policy research. My research explored beyond this surface. Using ethnographic data centred around a conceptual framework of the formation of HE aspiration, it documents how some young people "most able but least-likely" to participate in high-status HE institutions construct their Aspiration in everyday school life and with their classmates. These young people were aged 11-14, had high-prior attainment, but lived in a multi-ethnic area of the UK with relatively high socio-economic deprivation, and relatively low progression to Higher Education. Through participant observations alongside interactive games and group discussions, I collected data around the thesis' definition of young people's HE aspiration: their goal-driven plans for the future, their knowledge of HE including their past, present and future educational, cultural and career identities, their self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider self-concept, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of their school stakeholders. I explored how these worked towards (re-)negotiations and realisations of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education.

My results suggested that the young people rated their HE aspiration, relative to their classmates. Their HE aspirations were evolving, but rarely discussed at great length with their classmates or within their school. However, when they were discussed, their HE aspirations were far from deficient, they were interwoven and multifaceted. The young people linked their HE aspirations to aspects such as subject choice, cultural reference points, HE sector hierarchies, their knowledge of HE and notions of the good life. Their HE aspirations were embedded within a complex backdrop of school institutional priorities around for example, subject priorities, staff's expectations and understandings of HE, and tensions within the school between political and socially just commitments to offer WP and careers opportunities, and the limited reflective space to critique structural inequalities. My research calls for a re-think of the theoretical positioning of young people in Widening Participation as deficient, and argues for more nuanced methodological approaches and methods to research concepts within the discipline. It also encourages interventions within WP and careers to create reflective space for young people and other stakeholders such as school staff to explore their knowledge of HE. This is a sector that is constantly evolving, and this space could ensure that young people make further informed decisions about their plans for the future beyond compulsory education.

Abbreviations

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation

BCC - Birmingham City Council

BERA - British Educational Research Association

DfE - Department for Education

DfES - Department for Education and Skills in England

DWP - Department for Work and Pensions

FSM - Free School-Meals

HE – Higher Education

HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England

LPNs - Low participation neighbourhoods as outlined in POLAR

LSYPE - Longitudinal Study of Young People in England

"Most-able, least-likely" – "those most able but least likely to apply" to Higher Education as referenced in Government-issued Guidance to the Director of Fair Access (2011)

NACE - National Association for Able Children in Education

NAGTY - National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth in England

NCOP - National Collaborative Outreach Programme

NICEC - National Institute for Career Education and Counselling

NS-SEC - National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification

OfS - Office for Students

OFSTED - Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

ONS - Office for National Statistics

POLAR - Participation of Local Areas maps as maintained by the Office for Students

SES - Socioeconomic status

SLT - Senior Leadership Team

TUNDRA - Tracking Underrepresentation by Area maps as maintained by the Office of Students

WP – Widening Participation

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1   Thesis Introduction

This thesis presents an ethnographic case study exploring the Higher Education (HE) aspiration of sixteen young people aged 11-14, all with high prior attainment. It aims to explore how their HE aspiration is formed and documents the interactions about HE aspiration of these "most-able but least likely" young people. It considers how HE aspiration is presented by other stakeholders that they come into contact with, and how these presentations may also shape the young people's knowledge of HE and their aspiration to it. Its embedded approach explores HE aspiration as more than a mere and individualised question of whether the young people want to go to university. Instead, it develops a three-part conceptualisation of HE aspiration. Building particularly on the work of scholars such as Bourdieu (1986), Reay (1998), Reay, David & Ball (2005) and Archer, Dewitt & Wong (2014), this multi-dimensional concept considers HE aspiration to include:

1) young people's knowledge of education and career progression
2) school, government, HE and other institutional widening participation policy, initiatives and practice
3) wider socially and temporally-constructed concepts of the future self

The thesis also explores how broad knowledge of HE aspiration is formed at the intersections of socio-economic status and minority ethnicity. It documents the interactions of young people around HE aspiration and explores uneven power structures within HE aspiration in school, research, policy and practice. It questions current positioning of HE aspiration stakeholders and/or beneficiaries, their consequent (mis-)representation and voice in research, policy and practice, alongside challenges for knowledge construction on HE aspiration (Bhavnani, Chua and Collins, 2014). It will offer insights to encourage scholars, policy-makers and practitioners to consider how HE aspiration may be formed beyond the specific English context of the young people in this research. It intends to form part of the critical reconsideration and repositioning of the concept of HE aspiration which emphasises the importance and value of considering and engaging with young people within the field of Widening Participation (WP) research, policy and practice. Ultimately, it urges support for a national and institutional rethink of current WP that fundamentally frames potential HE applicants as deficient and "lacking what it takes" to succeed without help (Gonzalez-Canche & Rios-Aguilar, 2015:77).

1.1   Background

The process of applying to higher education, for some, starts at a very young age. For these applicants, not only are their GCSE and A-Level subjects strategically and/or systematically chosen to optimise their higher education choices, but in many cases, the secondary, and even sometimes the primary, school they attend has been a well-thought through process in a long term goal of enhancing that individual's university options. A prominent voice in the field of Widening Participation, Diane Reay, suggests in her 1998 paper that these individuals may be considered as those in the "always knowing" camp when it comes to making higher education choices. Arguably, their higher education aspiration is assumed. Her research is informed by Bourdieu, who, in line with his review in 1986, would assert that many of these individuals have an abundance of one or more type of capital at their disposal. These include social capital, the accessibility to social networks; cultural capital, an individual's culture and education; alongside economic capital, put simply, their financial wealth.

However, Reay (1998:519), also references another group of applicants in her paper; those who have "never [been] sure". According to Reay (1998), for this group of potential HE applicants, aspiration and progression to HE is negotiated as a predominantly internal process. This contrasts with the systematic and somewhat orchestrated process of those "always knowing". However, Donnelly (2015) notes that educational decision-making is mainly researched as an internal process, characterised and shaped by external factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. Less research has explored the role of schools in the HE decision-making process. There remains limited research exploring the micro-social and institutional processes that occur in schools to form and shape young people's HE trajectories. My research intends to address this gap by documenting the micro-social processes of a small group of young people. It focuses on their interactions, mainly in school, around HE and their aspiration to it. It considers the extents to which young people's HE aspiration is formed, manifests and fluctuates over time, in interaction with others.

1.2   Introducing those "most-able, least-likely"

The notion of being "most able but least likely to apply" to highly selective universities and courses was first explicitly outlined in the 2011 White Paper from the Secretary of State for

Business (2011, 1.2). This label has since risen in popularity within institutional and political rhetoric around Widening Participation (Ofsted, 2013; McCaig, 2015; Skene, Pollard, & House, 2016; Williams & Mellors-Bourne, 2019). It refers to those who are generally high achievers, indicating their high academic ability, but, who, more often than their academic counterparts, must negotiate various pathways to access Higher Education. This contributes to them being positioned within WP discourse as "least-likely" to apply; a discourse dominated by institutional and governmental organisations, who overwhelmingly set the priorities and focus for Widening Participation. Generally speaking, in the UK, Widening Participation refers to initiatives and research aiming to redress discrepancies amongst Higher Education participation rates in universities, although tensions exist around the policies and practices that this title encompasses (Jones, 2017). The dominant voice of institutions and governmental organisations in WP, contrasts with the limited research, policy and practice which appears to foreground and emphasise the importance of young people's knowledge of Higher Education and their aspiration to it. This noticeable absence of the voice of young people in its discourse, research, policy and practice presents a challenge for the field of Widening Participation. This challenge includes issues of ensuring that the priorities and values of the young people it aims to support are incorporated within the field's pursuit of social justice.

1.3   Exploring HE aspiration

Reflecting on these inconsistencies within WP discourse, I propose a reconsideration of how "most-able, least-likely" young people are positioned within WP research. To do so, I interrogate another politically charged notion within the field of WP: Higher Education aspiration. My research explores aspiration as it pertains to Higher Education (HE), with young people, as an overriding theme. This focus stems from a passion for promoting positive and enriching opportunities for children and young people as well as an interest in the study and sociology of education. However, it is also undoubtedly shaped by a backdrop, in the UK, of a universalised pre-18 education system and massified higher education system. This is combined with a political context where government agendas, littered with aspiration-raising discourse, purport to improve educational outcomes and advance social mobility (Hoskins &

Barker, 2017) and where, according to the DfE research brief (2014: 8) "raising aspirations and raising attainment tended to be [seen] as highly interlinked".

Trailblazers such as Burke (2009) and Harrison & Waller (2018) have highlighted how patronising WP and political discourse remains by, amongst other things, continuing to imply that some are lacking aspiration. They challenge the notion that if only one aspired higher, that their hard work would, and aspiration should, be enough to enter university, particularly the UK's most selective HE institutions. This assumes, of course, that these institutions represent the archetype to which all should aspire. Aspiration: the hope or ambition of achieving (Oxford Dictionary, 2018), with its renewed political and global significance, according to Baker (2017), places too much emphasis on an individual's shortcomings, foregoing the socio-economic dynamics at play. He calls for future research to account for the formulation of motivations, academic or otherwise, and the moral significance of young people's aspirations. Endeavours to dismantle this deficit discourse have been established by scholars such as Brooks (2003a), Shah, Dwyer & Modood (2010) and Basit (2012), Burke (2013), Loveday (2015), Grant (2017), Harrison (2018) and Bowers-Brown, Ingram and Burke (2019). Similar to Baker (2017) and others, I intend to challenge popular WP and political deficit discourse around HE aspiration. In this thesis, I will argue that it is most probable that true deficiency lies, not in the individuals themselves, but in any narrow, operationalised construction of aspiration, as much of English political discourse around raising aspiration would imply.

Whilst this thesis focuses on a case study of young people and their HE aspiration in an English school, by exploring HE aspiration as a multi-faceted concept, it also intends to engage with literature and research beyond the English context. Observing the Indian context, whilst reflecting on the wider role culture can play in shaping, constraining and empowering aspiration, Appadurai (2004), in his essay on the capacity to aspire, makes this concise assertion:

"Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life." (pg. 67)

Whilst Appadurai is not the first to suggest that plans for one's future are impacted by daily interactions, his essay placed a fresh lens over the links between culture, aspiration and poverty. It highlights how the undercurrent of poverty and its pervasive nature serves to constrain in every situation: aspiration, he asserts, being no exception. My thesis adds to our understanding of aspiration particularly in the field of WP, by reflecting on Appadurai's assertion and exploring aspiration as it is "...formed in interaction and in the thick of social life" (ibid). My research, as an ethnographic case study of how Higher Education aspiration is formed by young people, sheds light on interactions between young people, their peers and others, their aspiration and attainment. It is set predominantly in a multi-ethnic education context, in a school where poverty persists, for many, as an inescapable reality.

1.4   Research importance and contributions

My research focuses on the social interactions around HE aspiration of "most-able, least-likely" young people. These interactions are mainly within a school with a large multi-ethnic population and are documented through a variety of data collection techniques. This focus is important to the field of WP because firstly, it challenges narrow definitions of HE aspiration in WP discourse. Secondly, it questions the ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning of young people, and other potential applicants, within widening participation research, policy and practice. This research works with an ethnically-diverse group of young people, as a means to explore and hopefully amplify the voice of these stakeholders in WP research. Against the backdrop of socially-dynamic, politically-charged factors such as attainment, and the "marginalising" effects of ethnicity, race, school culture, poverty and socio-economic status, it asks, how do this group of young people form HE aspiration and what can this tell us about HE aspiration within the field of widening participation?

The research also aims to highlight an ontological contradiction in widening participation research and wider social research, by emphasising that these young people at the intersections are, and will be seen as, an essential topic of study, over and above their interactions with factors seen as specific to their direct experience. The research advocates that, for example, those who identify with ethnicities other than a majority White-British group should be consulted on environmental, social and political issues more generally, not just

factors that may be seen to disproportionately affect their community such as ethnicity, socio-economic and cultural diversity. This may also begin to subvert the positioning of certain groups in society as destitute, problematic and deficient. Uprichard (2010) discusses this contradiction in a critical examination of contemporary theorising around research with children as a "discrepancy between theory and practice". It is argued that whilst researchers theoretically position children as "active agents... when we examine the way that children are empirically involved in social research, we see another story" (pg. 5). Uprichard acknowledges that research in which children inform childhood should undoubtedly continue. I too, am firm in my opinion that research exploring ethnically, socio-economically and culturally diverse knowledge about such concepts should continue in earnest, in the effort to overturn mounting social injustice. However, like Uprichard's critique of children's current empirical involvement in social research, I feel there is a growing need to establish a larger body of research in the UK in which minoritised and/or marginalised populations contribute to research fields beyond their marginalisation.

This research with those "most-able, least-likely", is not to merely explore why these specific young people may or may not aspire in HE, but to explore how they may illuminate our understanding of HE aspiration more widely. The former would position HE aspiration as a binary choice, whilst the latter offers an opportunity for those on the fringes, to offer a unique viewpoint and contribute to knowledge on aspiration. Hopefully, my research into how aspiration is formed by these "most-able, least-likely" young people, will challenge the construction of WP research which sees some populations as intrinsically deficient. The experiences of these young people are heterogeneous. By exploring HE aspiration with them, I seek to challenge any arbitrary use of research populations within WP and begin to question whose knowledge on HE aspiration is heard, and privileged, within the field of widening participation.

1.5   Overview of the school context

At the time when the research was undertaken, Amberley Grove School (pseudonym) was a large multi-ethnic, state-funded, mainstream comprehensive school within the city of Birmingham. Using data gathered from UK School Performance tables (DfE, 2020, www.gov.uk/dfe), 99% of its pupils came from ethnic minority groups and 74% spoke English

as an additional language. The pupil population came from an area within the city with high socio-economic deprivation. As a result, over 60% of its pupils were eligible for free school meals at any time during the past 6 years; with free school meal eligibility being one indicator of relative child poverty within the UK. Birmingham also has a partial academically-selective education system at age 11. That said, Amberley Grove was rated Outstanding in 2013 (OFSTED, 2016); the top rating out of four levels, according to OFSTED, the inspector for educational standards within England (OFSTED, 2020). University and HE Destinations were firmly shared across the school's publications, with details of HE destinations for all their post-16 pupils listed prominently on their school display boards and website annually. These features amongst others, presented Amberley Grove as a unique educational location to explore the HE aspiration of "most-able, least-likely" young people. The research particularly focused on those aged 11-14, as they had yet to officially engage with the English national Widening Participation agenda – the Uni-Connect programme, formally known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) established in 2017, as well as its WP predecessors.

1.6 The Research Questions

To explore how young people from ethnic minority and lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly those with high academic attainment, in this school were positioned within WP and HE aspiration discourse, this thesis asks:

How is Higher Education aspiration formed by "most-able, least-likely" young people in their school?

This question will more specifically be addressed through the following sub-questions:
1) What is Higher Education aspiration for these young people in this school?
2) How do the young people discuss and interact with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and within their school about their HE aspirations?
3) How do these classmates and their school play a role in the young people's formations of HE aspirations?

1.7   The methodological approach

To answer these research questions, I used an ethnographic case study approach and a variety of methods, including observation, group discussions and interactive activities. In doing so, I aimed to observe and document young people's engagement with HE aspiration. Guided by my conceptual framework, the data collection methods facilitated opportunities for the young people to explore and discuss HE aspiration. These methods offered additional opportunities for the young to their post 16 trajectories, HE destinations and careers outside of their school's formal decision-making processes. The research explored the young people's HE aspiration, as well as the extent to which their formations of HE aspiration coincided with governmental and institutional debates around HE aspiration, explored both within the research activities and through the data analysis.

The terms knowledge and concept are used throughout the thesis. The use of the term knowledge is particularly in light of Mayall (2008), who writes that adults must "take account of children's knowledge in the work of trying to understand relationships between social groups (pg. 109)". When using the term knowledge, the thesis is referring specifically to what the young people express. Where the thesis refers to the term concept, it is focusing on the wider idea of HE aspiration. It is presented in this thesis, as a definition which draws on literature of HE aspiration, as shaped and explored with all stakeholders. The definition of HE aspiration as used throughout this thesis is outlined in Chapter 2.

1.8   Thesis outline

To begin answering the main research question, Chapter 2 offers a literature review discussing relevant texts around how "most-able, least-likely" young people form their Higher Education aspiration. The literature review explores debates around young people's prior attainment, aspects of "those most-able", and their socio-economic, multi-ethnic context, aspects of those "least-likely". It explores how these aspects can position young people as "most-able, least-likely". Following this, section 2.3 explores existing literature on HE aspiration. Throughout these sections of the review, I interrogate the intersectional challenges and contradictions that the literature presents, for me as the writer. The chapter concludes in section 2.3, with a conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed by young people in school, drawing on a broad definition of Higher Education aspiration, underpinned by literature in the review.

Chapter 3 of the thesis explores the context of Amberley Grove School. As an ethnographic case study, it is important to explore the significance of the context to the research. The chapter outlines the educational, ethnic and social demography of the school, and why it presented an interesting context to explore young people's formation of HE aspiration.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework of the research. It discusses the epistemological underpinnings – social constructivism; the methodology – an ethnographic case study; and the methods – observations, group discussions and interactive games - of the research. In section 4. It outlines the data collection methods used within the research, the participant selection process, the ethical considerations particularly those associated with researching with children and young people, and presents how the data was analysed. In addition, Chapter 4 reflects on my role as the researcher, as introduced in the preface. It discusses how my role challenged and reproduced issues of social justice and how my cultural identity and lived experiences often came into conflict with my role as an ethnographic researcher whilst documenting HE aspiration.

Chapter 5 presents the main findings of the research: the ways in which "most-able, least-likely" young people form their Higher Education aspiration. The chapter is separated into two main parts, to coincide with the data analysis approaches. The first, outlined in section 5.1, uses ethnographic thick description to develop vignettes of each young person participating in the study, sharing their HE aspiration alongside the writer's commentary. The second part of the chapter, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4, uses ethnographic thick description and thematic analysis to present findings on the wider formations of young people's HE aspiration. It is structured around the aspects of the definition of HE aspiration and the conceptual framework of its formation amongst young people in school. These findings are drawn from observations, interactive activities and group discussions.

In Chapter 6, referring back to literature presented in the research, I discuss the findings of the research and how these address the research questions. The chapter re-presents the conceptual framework in section 6.2, and explores how the findings coincide with, challenge and broaden definitions of HE aspiration. It also considers how the research questions around the role of classmates and the wider school play a role in young people's formation of HE

aspiration. It also discusses this research in countering deficit narratives of young people and their HE aspiration.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents the conclusion to the thesis. It concludes how the thesis addresses the research questions and reflects on my research journey to and through my doctoral research. It outlines some key research contributions to knowledge of HE aspiration, research, policy and practice from the approach and its findings. It briefly outlines some strengths and limitations of the research and makes recommendations for future research. It closes with my final remarks.

2   Literature review and Conceptual Framework

2.1   Introduction

This literature review discusses literature around how "most-able, least-likely" young people form their Higher Education aspiration. In section 2.2, it explores the underpinnings and subsequent popular usage of the term "most-able, least-likely" within UK education policy. In greater depth, section 2.2.1 explores what determines those within education policy as "most-able", alongside what role the notion of those "most-able" plays in driving WP policy, focusing on discourse around HE aspiration. Next, section 2.2.2 explores research and policy around social class, socioeconomic status and minority ethnic groups that contribute to positioning some young people as "least-likely". In the first part of this sub-section, the review explores how WP discourse around class and socio-economic groups positions some as "least-likely" to apply to HE. It discusses how these educational identities and stereotypes of class and socioeconomic status vary with HE participation. It considers how these "least-likely" identities shape wider priorities for WP research, policy and practice. The second part of this "least-likely" review focuses on how research into ethnicity documents the education experiences of minority ethnic groups and contributes to young people's positioning as "least-likely". With the expanse of research exploring how different gender groups experience education, the review draws on existing literature around gendered experiences, and explores these within the subtopics of social class and/or with those from minority ethnic backgrounds. This section also blends the active and passive tone, in an effort to convey the intersectional challenges and contradictions that the literature around ethnicity presents for the reviewer.

Section 2.3 moves to discuss existing literature around HE aspiration, more generally. It considers the overarching concept of HE aspiration in three interconnected facets and the stakeholders that young people encounter, in shaping these three aspects of HE aspiration. The first sub-section, 2.3.1, explores literature which discusses HE aspiration as young people's knowledge about their future education, particularly their intentions towards Higher Education, career progression, academic success and the value of education. The second sub-section considers HE aspiration as a feature of school, government, HE and other institutional WP

policy, engagement and practice. Thirdly, it considers literature around how HE aspiration forms part of a wider socially, culturally and temporally-constructed concept of the future self.

In the final section, I summarise what defined HE aspiration from my readings of the literature. This forms part of the conceptual framework proposed at the end of the chapter. The conceptualisation incorporates the stakeholders which may shape HE aspiration and the internal and external factors that may play a role. Reflecting on writings by Jabareen (2009) and Crawford (2014), my proposed conceptual framework underpins my research questions and methodology. It is revisited later in the thesis, within my analysis and discussion, to consider the extent to which it encompasses the nature of these young people's HE aspiration formation through school interactions.

2.2 Those "Most-Able, Least-Likely"

This section of the review will explore who is "most-able, least-likely". By interrogating literature from research, policy and practice around this term, this section of the review considers what research underpins this political idea of those "most-able, least-likely", and determines the extent to which political outputs align with the empirical research around what makes someone "most-able, least-likely". It discusses the relationship between political terminology and institutional policy within the field of WP, and the wider education discipline. It also briefly outlines how the notion of fairness within the UK HE system has given rise to WP policy around some groups of applicants being most deserving of a place at highly selective HE institutions. It also outlines how terminology is sometimes used and reiterated within WP policy to popularise policy priorities; terminology which is largely ambiguous and rarely problematised, but often contributes to an unquestioned, over-simplified governmental and institutional drives to redress complex educational injustices within society.

In February 2011, the term "most able but least likely" appears explicitly in the UK Government-issued Guidance to the Director of Fair Access. This government guidance firmly cemented the term's political significance in relation to Higher Education (HE) for the then recently-formed Coalition Government. Issued by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Minister for Universities and Science, the document outlines that:

"Increasing social mobility, extending fair access to Higher Education and the professions, and attracting a higher proportion of students from under-represented groups, particularly those most able but least likely to apply, are priorities for the Coalition Government." (Secretary of State for Business, 2011:1.2)

The guidance also slightly elaborates on its focus on under-represented groups to primarily include:

"Under-represented groups across higher education include students from less-advantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from some minority ethnic groups, and care leavers." (Secretary of State for Business, 2011:1.5)

Arguably, this landmark guidance has since underpinned WP definitions of popular, although ambiguous, labels around "most-able, least-likely". It has also played a role in setting current WP policy across the sector, including indicating and/or signalling priority groups to target increased HE participation. This guidance highlights these groups as notably under-represented and explicitly encourages institutions to consider these groups in their plans to attract students. Those listed above form the key groups that the government prioritised through this paper as under-represented within HE, and subsequently "least-likely to apply". This review discusses literature on two main aspects of this list: those considered as being from less advantaged backgrounds; taken to encapsulate those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds; and those from particular minority ethnic groups. This review discusses literature around the concepts of socio-economic (dis-)advantage and ethnicity, and considers the two features that have been positioned as contributing to some being considered "least-likely". This landmark White Paper contributed to an increasing shift in the WP landscape towards setting, documenting and monitoring the pursuit of particular targets for HE access and participation.

The 2011 White Paper was the latest instalment in UK HE policy tradition stretching back before the Robbins Report (1963) which sparked the initial mass expansion of the HE sector in the UK (McCaig, 2020). Later policies produced further upheaval within the UK HE system. These, for example, included the 1992 Act (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992) which ended the strict university-polytechnic divide, and the 2003 White Paper, which prompted the

rise of tuition fees to £3000 per annum (DfES, 2003). The latter also saw the initial appearance of the term "fair access" into political discourse around HE. The 2011 Guidance above signalled a further change in government HE policy. It marked the start of the UK government's refocus away from widening participation to HE for all, towards fair access to those "most able but least-likely to apply" - hereafter "most-able, least-likely". Fair access to those "most-able, least-likely", McCaig (2015) argues, is a form of widening participation practised, almost exclusively, across older UK HE institutions. Despite the notion of "most-able, least-likely" being at the heart of the access and widening participation policies of most selective institutions, as well as the 2011 Secretary of State for Business Guidance, the markers to discern who are "most-able, least-likely" to access HE are vague at best. The task of identifying these pupils has become the topic of much political and institutional debate.

Research, policy and practice focused on a fair access style of widening participation is based upon assumptions that each individual's prior attainment in statutory examinations is of equivalent merit. In doing so, it largely ignores the various contextual factors under which prior attainment has been (un-)achieved. Mounting evidence has prompted the use of a variety of contextual indicators in the selective HE application process (Boliver, Crawford, Powell, & Craige, 2017). However, in general, the fair access approach to widening participation, with its focus on higher attainment and academic selection, is often criticised for being elitist and narrow-minded (Zimdars et al, 2009; Palfreyman & Tapper, 2012; Brewster, 2016). In the review, I explore literature around the definitions of high prior and current attainment in the mainstream UK education system, by considering what makes some "most-able". I argue that whilst definitions of high attainment have become stagnant and inflexible, they are often used as proxies and predictors of those "most-able". I interrogate these definitions in the compulsory education system and considers how they may be intertwined with WP priorities and future HE participation.

In this section 2.2, I shed light on the complexity and heterogeneity of those "most-able, least-likely", by exploring some of the debates around high attainment, compulsory education experience and HE participation rates for those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and some minority ethnic groups. Section 2.2.1 highlights that despite ongoing research into the validity of existing attainment measures (Schneider, 2010; Chowdry et al,

2013), definitions of statutory high prior and current attainment are often used in the English context to determine academic capability and even potential. The section considers the ramifications this has in compulsory education settings for signalling some as "most-able", and potentially not others. Moving to consider the discussions of high prior and current attainment for WP priorities, practice and wider HE participation in section 2.2.1.3, this section also seeks to challenge the deficit discourse around those "least-likely". It highlights that WP discourse largely positions these "least-likely" groups as deficient and disadvantaged, with repeated calls and sentiments to ensure that their "talent is not wasted" (Secretary of State for Business, 2011:2.1). The notion that under-represented groups are near enough destitute and unfulfilled without an altruistic presence of HE, is a pervasive, unhelpful discourse within WP. This review considers the extent to which scholars challenge these notions within literature around those "least-likely" within the education system, and how policy, research and practice can and are incorporating inclusive approaches to begin to dismantle deficit and largely negative stereotypes of those "least-likely" to apply to HE.

Berg (2016) even goes as far as to say that statistically, the least qualified students from wealthy families have as much chance of going on to higher education as the highest-performing young people from lower-class families. Whilst Berg references the universalised USA HE context, it begs the question, are their even more stark under-representations that may be observed within the English and the wider UK massified HE systems? My view is that not all individuals should necessarily go to university, as although it can be a rewarding experience for many (Brewster, 2016:113), it may be not the appropriate trajectory for all. My research focus on "most-able, least-likely" young people is not to disregard the challenges and assets of potential applicants across all ages, backgrounds and along the attainment spectrum, nor is there an explicit assumption of selective institution superiority in the HE sphere; prestige should never be taken as a synonym for superior pedagogy. What is of research interest overall here, is particularly when we account for higher academic attainment in a lower socio-economic environment - some "most-able, least-likely" - how do young people form and share their HE aspiration in school?

2.2.1   Those "Most-able"

This research is sparked by ongoing political interest in "Increasing social mobility, extending fair access to Higher Education and the professions, and attracting a higher proportion of students from under-represented groups, particularly those most able but least likely to apply, are priorities for the Coalition Government." (Secretary of State for Business, 2011:1.2). This section drills further into the idea of those "most-able". In the first subsection, it considers the significance of this term. Then, the second subsection, entitled "Exploring definitions of "most-able" in English secondary education", explores what defines this group in the English secondary school system and further literature around the idea of those "most-able" in this school system. I outline the challenges and limitations in the English context, that exist in defining this term, amongst other similar ideas, by exploring its literary and political developments. The following section, discusses the experiences of these pupils in the secondary school system. I consider whether "most-able students in non-selective secondary schools [are] achieving as well as they should" (Ofsted, 2013:32). To conclude, I outline a definition of the term in this research for the educational context of Amberley Grove School, and reaffirm why this research has chosen to interrogate the idea of those "most-able" in light of the literary critique.

2.2.1.1   The significance of the term "most-able"

The term "most-able" holds significance across a variety of WP stakeholders, including schools and further education institutions, higher education institutions and governmental bodies. It has continued to be used throughout the School and WP sector, as a key feature of attainment and outreach priorities. Ofsted (2013) highlighted those "most-able" as an educational priority and outlined many failings across secondary schools to encourage and ensure that "most-able" pupils achieve their academic potential. Of the ten recommendations Ofsted (2013) made specifically to schools around the attainment and engagement for "most-able" pupils, three of those were focused around increasing information and guidance of HE destinations. This report reaffirmed the significance of the attainment of "most-able" young people, and reasserted the link between the educational experiences of those "most-able" with HE destinations within school and educational policy within England.

Examples in WP include Montacute's (2018:1) Sutton Trust report entitled "Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools"; Williams & Mellors-Bourne (2019) report headlined "Improving access for the most able but least likely: Evaluation of the Realising Opportunities programme". The latter report was drafted in collaboration with HE institutions across England - University of Birmingham, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, Newcastle University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Manchester, University of Sheffield, University of Sussex, UCL, University of Warwick, and University of York. Thirteen of these institutions are members of the Russell Group, an organisation which represents some of the most research-intensive UK HE institutions. Many also have some of the highest grade entry requirements and application selectivity in the UK HE system. In addition to these examples of the recent use of the term to report on WP priorities, the term also features in HE online publications. An example includes the University of Plymouth's Access and Participation priority, outlined in their 2020 website as to "help target and support the least likely but most able students, regardless of their background" (Faculty of Health, 2020). In addition to the WP and wider HE sector, government policy also explores the term in its reviews and guidance.

Commentary by the Chief Inspector of Ofsted (2016) reiterated that "most-able" children in non-selective state secondary schools – where most are educated - are not doing as well as their primary age attainment would indicate. In response to these challenges, a large majority of English schools published policy around how they identify, support and challenge their "most-able", although these policies are not uniform across the sector. At the time of writing this review, the Amberley Grove School, in this research was yet to officially publish a school-wide policy focusing on the engagement and challenge of "most-able" young people. However, the examples of the term's usage across the education sector demonstrate a continued political significance for government organisations as well as other organisations such as charities. It also highlights as recently as the collaborative report from the IES (2019), that many research-intensive institutions prioritise outreach for those "most-able, least-likely" through programmes such as Realising Opportunities. Reports, such as those from Ofsted have also re-emphasised a need to challenge "most-able" students and highlighted an educational priority

across the sector, including within schools and HE institutions, to sustain engagement with these groups throughout their educational career.

2.2.1.2   Exploring definitions of "most-able" in English secondary education

There remains much deliberation around how to identify those who are "most-able" academically. The search for those "most-able" in HE, largely stems from the notion which positions selective UK HE institutions as flawless beacons of the highest academic ability in the land; presumably only accessible by the "most-able" minds. Terms such as higher attainers (London Gov, 2020:2, Ofsted, 2013); more-able and exceptionally-able (NACE, 2019); high-achieving, gifted and/or talented are amongst those used somewhat interchangeably in England with the phrase "most-able" to identify those with, or the propensity to achieve, high attainment in secondary schools. The terms vary with institutional priorities, political fashions and research developments (Tunnicliffe, 2010a).

As a devolved priority in the UK, each region within the country – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – sets its own education policy. With this research focusing on a school within England, this literature review concentrates primarily on the definitions of the term "most-able" in the English context. In England's state education system, schools largely teach the English National Curriculum. The National Curriculum provides a uniform template for the topics that schools should teach in a set of subjects including Maths, English and Science, by each of the five Key Stages (Roberts, 2021). As part of the regionally devolved approach to education and its National Curriculum, in England identifying "most-able" or gifted pupils, is a requirement for all 11-19 education settings (Eyre & Lowe, 2013). The responsibility for identifying and supporting "most-able" learners has been redirected away from a national directive to a school's internal policy (Chadderton, 2015; Andrews, 2016).

Despite this re-assignment of "most-able" policy towards schools, Koshy, Smith & Casey (2018) argues that the criteria for identification in state-run institutions has remained, in practice, relatively uniform over the last 30 years. According to Tunnicliffe (2010b), high academic attainment or those "most-able" in English schools generally recognises learners who: produce high scores in one of the nationally or internationally recognised standardised assessments issued between 10 and 16. The approach does also allow for observed exceptional ability in an

area outside of academic and cognitive ability. Ofsted (2015), however, presents an equivocal approach to defining the term. In its 2015 report reviewing the national state of "most-able" students in non-selective secondary schools, it uses "most-able" to refer to pupils starting secondary school having achieved a National Curriculum Level of 5. However, the report also highlights that there is "currently no national definition for most able" and encourages schools to develop a contextual definition of what defines high academic attainment in their school.

Prior to 2015, the assessment of pupils' performance at the end of the Key Stage 2, by age 11, in the National Curriculum, was through national statutory examinations. Pupils' attainment was then ranked and recorded through National Curriculum levels, ranging from 1-9. The levels were used to indicate the types of attainment that the student had demonstrated in each subject and were derived by consulting with education leaders in their relevant fields. Certain National Curriculum levels were associated with age-related expected attainment. For example, attainment of level 4 at age 11 in Maths, English and Science was associated with age-related expected attainment; level 5 or above was associated with higher than expected age-related attainment. As well as being commonly used to identify those pupils displaying higher academic ability, the National Curriculum Level 5 has been positively associated with future HE participation (Crawford, 2014). However, in 2015, following English National Curriculum reforms, the National Curriculum levels were replaced as an attainment descriptor with a joint scaled and raw score result system (Parliament. House of Commons, 2018).

Rasmussen & Lingard (2018), in their review of ability recognition in the English education climate, highlight that this perspective aligns with the notion that ability is fixed, which stands in contrast with the English model's purported respect for "multiple intelligences". They also critique many English provisions for appearing to perpetuate and exacerbate, rather than challenge, inequalities in identifying and selecting "most-able" pupils that many of the same initiatives seek to overturn. One such initiative was the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) in England. This initiative targeted those pupils who featured in the top 5% nationally of all learners, in England (Hartas, Lindsay & Muijs, 2008). In a review by Campbell et al (2007), an over-representation of 18% was seen in NAGTY student membership in young people in the highest socio-economic group compared to a contrasting under-representation of 15% of young people in the lowest socio-economic group. Given that English

policy around academic ability and high academic attainment infers a normal distribution amongst a large population, percentages in a cohort that diverge greatly from expected values, suggest a systematic issue with the prediction variable.

In contrast and more recently, the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) explores beyond these measures of attainment. They refer to those with higher attainment in the school system as "more able" (NACE, 2019). They consider more able learners to include those potentially underachieving in their education or those whose academic attainment or potential cannot be effectively captured through existing or national measures (NACE, 2021). They dissuade institutions from focusing on standardised percentages of high ability learners with their pupil populations. They suggest that outlining percentages related to pupil attainment proportions can fuel misconceptions that high ability learners achieve well across all subjects. They also suggest that fixed percentiles and rankings may create an over-reliance on using data to identify high ability learners; data, particularly statutory measurements, may miss out on underachieving high ability learners.

Identifying those "most-able" varies across schools and other organisations. The variety of measures encourages a bottom-up, context-specific approach to engaging and supporting "most-able" pupils within schools. However, Ofsted (2015) suggests that even the move to the current system is unsatisfactory to ensure sustained high academic attainment of pupils in non-selective state secondary schools, as many provisions fail to effectively identify and support these groups effectively. Referring to those "most-able", the Ofsted report includes those whom, upon entry in Year 7, have attained the National Curriculum Level of 5 or above in Mathematics and English in national statutory tests, or who have the potential to do so. Unfortunately, too many of these pupils do not appear to sustain the academic standard that their earlier attainment would indicate. Pomerantz and Pomerantz (2002:1) suggest that "Able Underachieving teenagers" represent a substantial proportion of able pupils, and their underachievement should "be investigated and tackled systematically".

Further discrepancies in recognising those "most-able" were also notably identified amongst and within ethnic groups. Archer (2008) argues that academic success is positioned as an institutional illusion for young people who identify with ethnicities other than White British. Through "discourses of 'the ideal pupil", Archer (2008:89) argues that the academic

achievements of British young people who are not White British, are disregarded and dismissed as illegitimate. Literary and political discussions around some of the relationships between aspiration, ethnicity and socio-economic status will be explored in more detail later in this review.

2.2.1.3   The experiences of those "most-able" in secondary schools

The 2015 Ofsted report builds on its previous 2013 report on "most-able" pupils. It presents the following key findings on the state of educational provision for those "most-able" in non-selective secondary schools. It suggests that in groups of those "most-able", differences exist in academic outcomes between girls and boys, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those schools where proportions are small. The 2015 report also emphasises links with "most-able" students and HE participation in "top and 'most prestigious'" universities (2015:6). For example, it states that "Nationally, too many of our most able students fail to achieve the grades they need to get into top universities" (Ofsted, 2015:7) and "There were worrying occasions when schools did too little to encourage the most able students to apply to prestigious universities" (Ofsted, 2015:8). The report also surveys the experiences of Year 8, as well as Year 11, "most-able" pupils in schools. Responses by those surveyed from Year 8, suggest that their schools could offer more to encourage their subject and extra-curricular interests. Experiences of "most-able" pupils reportedly varied both between and within schools. Disruption and classroom behaviour were viewed differently by Key Stage 3 "most-able" pupils compared with school staff. Staff supposedly "had a rosier view of behaviour than the most able students" (Ofsted, 2015:16). Overall, Ofsted (2015) felt that there was less academic challenge, assessment and tracking throughout the Key stage 3 school years for "most-able" pupils in many secondary schools. Failures to set these rigorous targets for "most-able" pupils in formative secondary years, have meant that many have "…been left to flounder for too long and are not able to maximise their potential" (2015:6).

The findings of the Ofsted (2015) report are relevant to the consideration of "most-able" young people in my research . The report highlights that "most-able, least-likely" are not a homogenous group and that these groups are often academically underserved through the English secondary system, particularly in non-selective schools. It outlines that systematic

differences exist in expected and actual achievement between groups of those "most-able" across, as well as within, school settings. It also suggests that inconsistencies exist around the educational experiences of those "most-able"; school staff appear to report a somewhat romanticised version of the educational achievement and experiences of those "most-able", when compared in general, with the responses of the young people themselves, particularly those in Key stage 3. This thesis will explore some of the findings that this report raises in relation to "most-able" young people in Key Stage 3. In my field work, I observed, facilitated and documented classroom discussions between those "most-able" and consider their HE aspiration against the backdrop of English national policy focused around increasing "most-able" HE participation to highly academically-selective institutions.

2.2.1.4   Defining those "most-able"

This thesis will interrogate the prior attainment measure of National Curriculum Level 5, and its equivalent composite measures, and how the HE aspirations of some young people aged 11-14, were encompassed within this measure. The continuous political significance of the National Curriculum Level 5 and its equivalents within the revamped composite attainment measure approach, as well as suggested early link with future HE participation, present key reasons for its use in this thesis as a central characteristic – an indicator of "most-able" pupils. Despite the controversial use of the Level 5 indicator as a definition of attainment and the even more dubious use as a marker of potential, what it does offer to this thesis is the opportunity to explore how high attainment is experienced as a research concept, a policy priority and in practice within school within the field of WP. Its use as a central characteristic offers opportunities to interact with, theoretically position, and to "amplify" the voice of some individuals at the heart of, the political discourse around "most-able, least-likely".

However, using the Level 5 indicator as a definition of attainment is not without its limitations: epitomised by its discontinuation in 2015 and replacement with a composite measure (DfE, 2016). My research respects the limitations that this may impose, but by utilising this early indicator, this research also aimed to incorporate some "underachievers", often overlooked within WP research. This research considered the classroom interactions of those young people who have attained a National Curriculum Level of 5 in Maths and English. It considers

who these "most-able," young people are and explores what they say about their HE aspiration in their classrooms, where, when and with whom. It notes the similarities and differences between the young people's HE aspiration and the discourse around the topic of their school.

This thesis advocates for ongoing research, interrogation and critique of education policy and its discourse with young people, in an effort to maximise their voice within research and policy. The idea that those positioned in government education policy as "most-able" are oriented towards HE participation within their educational trajectory is a dominant undertone within government and HE institution policy. Through my review, I have identified a gap in the literature around how young people may become labelled as "most-able". As such, minimal consideration has been given to how this label, and its counterparts, may impact their educational experiences and opportunities within the classroom, as well as their HE aspiration. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring how young people with high academic attainment – or those "most-able" – interact about HE aspiration. It also considers the knowledge that the young people share about HE, and how this is constructed and evolves within their interactions in school. Although my research focuses specifically on the English context, the knowledge shared by these "most-able" young people about HE aspiration, may be useful to interrogate educational contexts across the UK and further afield. This thesis could offer insights that support education research, policy and practice for those "most-able" in other geographical contexts. In many regions HE has been – or intends to be - situated as an educational priority linked to high pupil attainment. Schools, HE and governmental institutions amongst other stakeholders may consider how an emphasis on high attainment is linked to HE aspiration across the educational trajectory. Also, even more importantly, they may consider how this link is experienced, negotiated and vocalised by "most-able" young people, particularly when reflecting on their intersecting identities.

2.2.1.5   Summary

This section of the review has discussed literature and policy around educational attainment, as an indicator of academic capabilities within the English school system. It has explored how standardised educational levels are used, and challenged, as proxies for educational potential within this context; proxies that contribute, deliberately or covertly, to the streaming of young people within core and extra-curricular activities. This section addressed how those "most-able" are often both simultaneously included and excluded from discourse around HE aspiration; included in WP discourse, practice and research by being labelled as "most-able", but only where their sustained educational attainment is labelled, by institutions, as higher than their age-related counterparts. Where their attainment falls short of institutional expectations many are excluded from WP practice and research. The review has explored how the level of 5 contributed to the positioning of some young people as "most-able" and offered further discussions around the level's significance to the term "most-able" and the wider thesis. For the purpose of this research, despite its limitations, those young people who have attained the National Curriculum Level 5 in Maths and English by age 11, were used to determine those "most-able" young people aged between 11 and 14 - Key Stage 3 - at Amberley Grove. It was used as a selection criteria for participants in this research; explored later, in the Methodology chapter.

2.2.2   Those "Least-Likely"

This section reviews research and policy around working class identities and multiple ethnicities that contribute to positioning some young people as "least-likely". For ease of reference, the concepts of ethnicity and class, are discussed within two separate subsections. However, it is important to note that for many, including many of those within Amberley Grove, these factors exist interdependently at intersections of individual identities.

Class in this thesis, as it relates to those "least-likely", explores how lower socio-economic populations and particular class identities are often presented in WP policy, practice and research. With the free school meal eligibility measure indicating high rates of child poverty in Amberley Grove, this review also considers how this measure positions some as "least-likely".

2.2.2.1   Social class and socio-economic status

This section explores the challenges for WP and social justice policy, research and practice, around defining those from working classes and lower socio-economic groups and their school experiences. It also considers how free school meal eligibility, is used as a measure of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage in the education sector and is occasionally interlinked and misappropriated as a proxy for working class identities and lower socio-economic groups in WP. It discusses how, within WP, working class identities and lower socio-economic populations continue to be associated with lower attainment in schools, which is subsequently linked with lower rates of HE application and participation, particularly to selective institutions. It explores how these discourses around working classes and lower socio-economic groups contribute to many being positioned as "least-likely" to apply to HE.

Challenges in the discourse

Broadly speaking, the consideration of social class and socio-economic status in research debates around those "least-likely", emphasises the role that compulsory schooling plays in the reproduction of class differentials (Archer et al, 2005). This often stands juxtaposed to policy rhetoric which heralds a meritocratic society and positions schools as the engines of social mobility (Gibb, 2016); it is in this speech that Gibb controversially also reaffirms the government's commitment to transforming the opportunities of England's most disadvantaged young people.

Academics in WP research, such as Reay (2016), outline the contested debates around defining social class and socio-economic status and the challenges associated with categorising individuals and groups. This often necessitates a simplification of social class and socioeconomic status for methodological or operational purposes (Bathmaker et al , 2016a). Whilst social class remains intertwined with the socio-economic status, they are not synonymous. Socio-economic status (SES) is widely-reported as a combined measure of one's economic and social status (Baker, 2014), however this term is constantly redefined and repositioned. Definitions of social class also continue to undergo revisions and become increasingly complex. For example, a review by Savage et al (2013) found evidence of a dynamic and multi-level class structure not currently catered for within the widespread use of the UK's National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). Rubin et al (2014) highlight

the importance of factors such as age, ethnicity, indigeneity, and rurality in an individual's self-affiliation with a class identity. They advocate for an integrated objective-subjective approach to measurement of social class and SES as current research definitions often overlook the role of subjective elements in pursuit of objective measures. Less has been explored in the literature about young people's individual references to SES and class. Considering this, my research explored young people's knowledge of educational hierarchies and elitism.

Thrupp (1999) proposes that systemic issues in education between working classes and middle classes result from lingering power struggles. He generalises that a harmony exists within a home-school dyad for middle-class culture. In turn, he suggests that an institutional discord is present between comparative home and school relationship for working-class culture. This, he argues, may perpetuate a discourse of the failure of working-class young people; beyond the responsibility of school, as an educational institution, towards a fixed structural and social class-based conflict. Around ten years later, Roberts (2009) - with a focus on family background, education and jobs - explores class and socio-economic status as it pertains to concepts of continuity and change. Roberts comments on how societal elites in the UK, have consistently reproduced a pipeline, seemingly impervious to change, that maintains positions of power and influence. This pipeline, he affirms, ensures a select few make arguably short steps from elite schools to elite universities to exclusive jobs of economic, political and social influence, a notion also echoed by Cadwalladr (2008). This, Roberts asserts, is against a backdrop of constant upheaval in the UK education and job sector, especially since 1945, for those of lower socio-economic status. Through the lens of opportunity structure theory, Roberts (2009) argues it is not a "poverty of aspirations" (pg. 364) or "wrong choices" (pg. 365) that maintain the imbalance between groups. Rather for Roberts (pg. 355), imbalance persists due to the differing forums which these "young people are required to be reflexive and to make successive choices". Roberts (ibid) outlines that this education climate requires that young people assert their individuality, decision-making capacity and their reflexivity; features of opportunity structures that have persisted rather than weakened. The requirement to navigate all three in the pursuit of future educational endeavours poses risks for all groups. However, according to Roberts , for working class young people to navigate all three poses risks that many are less well equipped to effectively negotiate compared with middle class counterparts.

Thompson (2019:2) suggests that education has a unique role to play in our understanding of class in the "contemporary post-industrial societies" of England in 2019. Thompson acknowledges that class "is mediated by race and gender" (ibid) and its impact continuously evolves. However, Thompson also highlights that class still structures the population's access to resources and shapes their way of life; "including… their educational attainment" (ibid). Building on the analysis of contemporaries such as Ingram (2011) and Reay (2018), Thompson (2019:2), argues that "educational inequality is not merely a reflection of processes and struggles occurring elsewhere: education is a crucible of class, a place where class is made, both in moulding individual consciousness and in reproducing the class structure itself". In this, he suggests that education may perpetuate the inequalities, including class disparities, that it professes to overturn. This presents a challenge for WP discourse, policy, practice and research. How can the field of WP, its institutions, practitioners and academics, as stakeholders within education, counteract the class injustices through its endeavours to widen participation to HE, that it intrinsically creates and upholds?

Overall, this literature spans more than twenty years. It indicates that whilst the specific challenges evolve, what persists is a social imbalance which sees those from working class and lower socio-economic groups consistently underrepresented in socially elite institutions, including within Higher Education. This underrepresentation results from, amongst other things, higher risks associated with venturing beyond presumed working class educational and career trajectories. The increased risk leveraged for working class groups and their more common need to weigh up the return based on those risks, contributes to them being situated as less likely to apply to HE: "least-likely". This discourse situates responsibilities for subverting educational disparities associated with class and SES, at a macro-level of education and social justice policy, dismissed as beyond the scope of the home and school relationship. As a field within Education, Widening Participation has a challenge to disentangle its objectives to subvert class disparities from Education's raison d'être. Overall, these reflections, spanning literature over twenty years on the challenges within the WP discourse on class and SES, suggests that there remains limited reflection with young people. My research presents an opportunity to consider how young people themselves, who are politically and institutionally positioned as "most-able, least-likely" in WP, may voice their own class and SES identities in relation to their HE aspiration.

Researchers such as Savage et (2013), Rubin et al (2014) and Bathmaker et al (2016a), suggest that, in response to evolving social demographics, a pursuit for objective definitions necessitates revisions of both labels; low SES and working-class. However, this review finds that a pursuit for objective definitions presents a gap in the literature. There is limited research into how the young people themselves voice their own identities of class and socio-economic status in WP policy, research and practice. This review finds little content exploring the voice and self-affiliation with class identities for young people in the field of WP, particularly those from minority ethnic groups. As such, my fieldwork intended to explore young people's knowledge of HE and their aspiration to it, with young people, and aimed to voice their knowledge and priorities. As an exploration oriented towards social justice and maximising participant voice, this thesis considers how these may mirror or diverge from the priorities of the dominant WP discourse and institutions. It will argue for the increased inclusion of their voices in WP policy, practice and research.

Considering free school meal eligibility and poverty

As discussed in the previous section, there remains a search for operationalised definitions of class and socioeconomic status in the field of widening participation. Of mounting methodological challenge to this pursuit is the seamless manner by which political terms such as disadvantaged, those with free school-meal (FSM) eligibility, poor, low socioeconomic status, amongst others proliferate in education rhetoric and are used interchangeably in public discourse. An example of this exists in a policy document released by the UK Coalition government of 2010-2015 (DfE, 2015). In it, the "Education of disadvantaged children" is linked within the statutory UK policy around "those with free school-meal (FSM) eligibility". Free school meals are a state benefit subsidised by the government. Families and their children may be eligible to receive free school meals if they are in receipt of a specific income-related benefit and their income is below the stated threshold. Reay (2016) cautions against the presumptive use of proxies for the notion of working class; recognising that terms used may only serve as an approximation for class and socioeconomic status. The interchangeable use of terms around socioeconomic status and disadvantage is even sometimes misappropriated and equated with holding a working class identity. However, Reay also outlines that despite limitations with current terms and methods used to demarcate class differentials, a problem

persists that those from poorer backgrounds are consistently underrepresented in the most selective universities.

With Amberley Grove School's high rates of pupils with free school meal eligibility, this school educates many young people identified as living in relative poverty and/or absolute poverty. Relative poverty is where income is below 60 percent of the median in that year, whilst absolute poverty is defined as households where income is below 60 percent of the 2010-11 median income (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). Children and young people living in poverty in the UK, reflect a small but nevertheless, important subsection of society. Appadurai (2004:64) articulates that whilst local variations appear, "Poverty is many things, all of them bad"; poverty is not to be seamlessly equated with holding a "working-class" identity. In addition, not all those living in poverty are necessarily eligible for FSM nor do those living in poverty automatically come from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, poverty remains omnipresent and whilst the relationship between poverty and socioeconomic status and class is complex, the inability to access necessities due to economic poverty undoubtedly interacts with and shapes the educational experiences of all those in Amberley Grove, whether they live in poverty or do not. Despite being a precarious proxy for identifying those in poverty, FSM-eligibility remains an easily obtainable and replicable measure within the UK education system. As an indicator of poverty rates, FSM-eligibility has been used in social research to explore the discrepancies between HE participation rates of those eligible and those from the wider population (Pickering, 2019). The HE participation rates for those who received FSM aged 15 in 2018/19 was 26.3% across all of HE, and 4.1% for high tariff HE institutions. This was compared to 45.1% of young people who did not receive FSM at age 15 entering HE, and 12.0% to high tariff HE institutions (Explore Education Statistics, 2021). However, dichotomising the two populations is methodologically problematic. Comparing the graphically-skewed extreme population of those eligible for FSM, with a more normally-distributed population, in a dichotomous relationship arguably misrepresents the nature of the relationship between the two. It implies an arbitrary, binary and categorical distinction between the two groups; an oversimplification.

The DWP outlined that around 35% of those in relative and absolute poverty were not eligible for FSM, suggesting that many pupils living in poverty may be miscategorised (DWP, 2013).

Rates of FSM eligibility are   often used in WP policy and research as an indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty when considering how and where to provide WP initiatives (Pickering, 2019; Gorard et al, 2019). The use of the term 'disadvantaged' in public policy and social research by the Institution to label participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds or those living in poverty, can have the effect of propagating the deficit narrative and implying deficiency on the part of the individual, with potentially ostracising effects. Embedded within the structuralist approach, post-structuralism presents philosophical critique to this notion. Theorists argue that Western democracies perpetuate the idea that human experience should be perceived as binary opposites in constant conflict, for example, citizenship versus non-citizenship (Peters & Wain, 2002).

Throughout this review of the literature around free school meal eligibility and WP discourse more widely, various other dual labels inhabit the discourse. These labels are widely referenced in relation to HE aspiration and include, traditional and non-traditional backgrounds; those from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds; or the affluent and less affluent. Burke (2002) challenges the over-abundance of binary opposites in widening participation discourse, arguing that it narrows the concept of power that permeates across the WP field. Power, according to Burke (2002:106) becomes transformed from that which "...circulates everywhere, is unpredictable, shifting, generative and regulatory" to a superficial representation of power which is two-dimensional and dualistic. In a sense, by creating dyadic labels to address complex social injustices - for example between the advantaged and disadvantaged - it suggests that both are equal counterparts within the discourse. For example, it removes the element of power that those advantaged, can and may use to maintain their position and privilege within society, to the detriment of others - those disadvantaged. Harman (2017:101), discussing work by Ranciere (1991), Friere (1996) and Bourdieu (1998), explores the distribution of power amongst WP stakeholders in the consideration of democracy, emancipation and HE as a "sensible" trajectory. Harman (2017) challenges any simple view of power within the WP field, where HE entrants are automatically empowered by their participation. Exploring Ranciere (1991), who advocates for story-telling as a technique to subvert injustice, Harman (2017) suggests a disruption of the stark distinction between structural hierarchy and separation of knowledge between the student and the academic. Harman (2017:105), suggests that these labels are not mutually exclusive and calls for a

reflexive consideration of "more democratic approaches to knowledge production in the area of widening participation, and accounts which open up to subjective experience". However, there appears to be limited literature which considers the ontological positioning of younger pupils in WP research around the empowerment of their own HE aspiration.

In an effort to begin to include knowledge from these groups - including challenging labelling and pitching haves against have nots, one side against another – I move away from the use of opposing groups to understand their HE aspiration. With its higher than average rates of FSM entitlement, poverty exists as a pervasive feature for Amberley Grove's pupils. Rather than considering a stark difference between those eligible and those who have never been eligible, this thesis considers how this backdrop of high rates shapes the notions of some of those "most-able, least-likely" in Amberley Grove.

Working class young people and school experiences

This section considers the educational experiences in secondary schools of those from various working-class backgrounds. WP research has focused largely on the accounts of working-class boys as those "least-likely" to apply to HE. This section begins by exploring WP research with working class boys as this focus appears to be a dominant discourse in WP. It explores how this discourse contributes to our understanding of working-class boys as "least-likely", even when they display high attainment. Archer and Yamashita (2003) report a potential conflict in secondary schools between working-class masculinities as a confounding factor in the negotiation of the educational landscape. Ingram (2009) diverts the focus away from an emphasis on any internal failure of working-class boys themselves, and any individual lack of aspiration, towards their experiences of academic success. According to Ingram, the notion of academic success alongside a working class identity can present growing conflicts for some boys' educational experiences. Ingram focuses on their experiences within an academically-selective school; an educational setting where pupils join the school at age 11 similar prior attainment.

These internal and situational conflicts come as no surprise given findings by Collins, Collins and Butt (2015). Collins et al (2015) suggest that there is a "distance-decay effect" on attainment levels in a boy's selective school. Focusing principally on the boys' presumed socio-

economic groups and ethnicities, the researchers conclude that pupils within the school from deprived areas of Birmingham and/or black and minority ethnic backgrounds, displayed lower academic performance relative to their counterparts. They attribute this somewhat, to these individuals living in what they call a "high vulnerability postcode". Collins et al (2015) criticise the school and suggest that it is reproducing social disparities rather than combatting them. The researchers propose possible initiatives, both from their research observations and external best practice, to counteract current patterns. However, they recognise that some responsibility for systematic discrepancies between school achievement of marginalised groups, should be taken by the school. This suggests that even where the "most-able" boys display similar attainment upon entry to secondary school, experiences throughout their secondary years contribute to poorer performance in statutory assessments. Collins et al (2015) highlight that factors, such as differential attainment in selective schools, may have a systematic impact on the educational experiences of certain groups. Lower attainment is related to a reduced likelihood of attending HE, particularly selective HE institutions. These factors may be in favour of one privileged group or to the detriment of a marginalised group. Whether they favour or deter, these factors will almost undoubtedly impact negatively on someone's ability to achieve concurrently with their peers. This further situates even some "most-able" boys, as "least-likely".

However, research such as Ingram (2009) and Collins et al (2015) are set in a single-sex, state selective system and explore the educational experiences of the working class boys. Research centred around higher academic attainment of working class pupils in secondary schools, tends to be focused on the experiences of boys. There is a large body of research which explores the role of gender differentials in positioning some as "least- likely" in relation to HE and aspiration (Burke, 2006; Fuller, 2009; Schoon & Parsons, 2011; Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff, 2011; Stahl, 2015; Berrington, Roberts, & Tammes, 2016). This research, by exploring mixed gender settings, considered the experiences of academic attainment and working-class identities of "most-able" young people in mixed comprehensive schools. Some studies do, however, explore the educational experiences of working-class females, and how these may shape, and even somewhat curtail, their educational aspirations. A landmark study by Hey (1997) documents the friendships of some young women and how these negate their schooling, family and their positionality and relations to boys and men as subordinate. Hey (1997) focuses the study on

the young women's interactions and their dominant constructions of heterosexuality in school. This work has also paved the way, for example, for research by Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth (2007). They found that demands and performativity of hyper-heterosexuality and hetero-femininity were related to the educational experiences and aspirations of the working class, multi-ethnic young women within their study. Many transformed their educational aspiration or even halted them altogether due to internal or external conflicts in performing acceptable models of working-class and middle class femininity. The researchers explain that these challenges were intermingled with 'race' and gender identities, in addition to social class differentials.

Fuller (2009) moves away from the research dominance on the role of class in shaping aspiration. She explores young women's aspirations in a girl's comprehensive school. She argues that whilst class may be of macro level significance in combatting discrepancies in future educational plans, her findings suggest that class does not contribute to large systematic differences between the girls in her study in relation to aspirations. She does however suggest it has a key role to play in attainment. She advocates for the greater consideration of factors such as, ethnicity, self-identification and gender as factors shaping educational aspiration.

Overall, less consideration has been given in the field of WP to how the minimal critical reflections on the nuances of high academic attainment of working-class girls presents a challenge for the field. This thesis argues that this contributes to why these groups of girls may be situated as "least-likely". The literature suggests that gender plays a key role in shaping the discourse around class debates of those "least-likely". However, what remains less clear is how these debates around class and socio economic status may play out in interactions within school, between those "least-likely" in mixed-gender education settings. This thesis offers the opportunity to study the nuances of the educational experiences of higher academic achievers within largely working-class and/or lower socioeconomic school environments.

Working class young people and higher education

In academic and policy research, observed differences in HE participation between those from different social class groups and socio-economic backgrounds is largely attributed to differing achievement levels (Croll & Attwood, 2013). The expansion of the HE sector has arguably led

to rising proportions of working-class individuals and those from lower socio-economic groups entering the university landscape (Universities UK, 2017); for many this equates to a problem solved. For some, this is taken in support of an English meritocracy, endorsing notions that it is achievement alone that sees some "least-likely" to apply to university, particularly most selective institutions. Nevertheless, Reay (2016:133) outlines that "the problem of social class in higher education has not gone away; rather it has transmuted from one of restricted access to one of 'who goes where'" and remains "an elephant in the room". Social theory, academic research, public policy and practice arenas have all highlighted continued disparities between HE participation rates across SES and class. Efforts have been made, with varying success, across the Higher Education (HE) sector to increase participation in HE for individuals from backgrounds "least-likely" to apply to higher education. So much so that in 2019, the Office for Students confirmed that around £800 million had reportedly been spent on this endeavour from Access Agreement funding alone (Office for Students, 2019a). Nevertheless, progress to overturn disparities, particularly in highly selective institutions has been slow.

Figures suggest that these universities lag far behind their less-selective counterparts in attracting students from the breadth of the UK's social stratum (OfS, 2019d). To disentangle the determinants which perpetuate ongoing underrepresentation, a large econometric study by Chowdry et al (2013) used linked data to explore the HE participation of individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds. They found that the variation in HE participation rates between those from different socio-economic groups was largely accounted for by prior achievement. However, prior achievement did not account for all the variability observed in HE participation rates between socioeconomic groups, with Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) finding that the UK socioeconomic gap in bachelor's degree participation persists even when accounting for pupil's prior achievement.

Less is known about what contributes to the variability in HE participation rates between individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds and their equally-credentialed counterparts. Shiner and Noden (2015) criticise some stakeholders, such as Oxford University (2010), for attributing a meritocratic explanation to the discrepancies in application rates. They call for extensions of "meritocratic rationalisations" to incorporate the rationale that if applications are moderated by attainment then "attainment is subject to ethnic and other socio-economic

inequalities" (pg.1187). Findings from a paper by Anders (2012) potentially supports the amelioration of mounting pressure on the Institution to redress the imbalance of participation between different socioeconomic groups. He asserts that it is not discrimination on the part of HE institutions which perpetuates the underrepresentation, but that those from "poorer backgrounds" are less likely to apply.

In contrast, Croxford & Raffe (2014:77) found that, not just in England but, across the UK, some parts of the HE admissions process may be viewed as "unfair to lower-class" applicants. The notion of fairness has propagated the political discourse around HE participation since talks of the sector's expansion began in the 1960s; debates around of fairness in HE access – or fair access - persist today. Boliver (2013:344) critically explores the concept of fairness in access to some highly selective UK universities. The findings suggest that applicants from "lower class backgrounds" (pg.344) continue to be much "less likely" than their equally-qualified peers to apply to Russell Group institutions. Mangan et al (2010:347) note, in their exploration of fair access, achievement and geography, that working-class applicants are more likely to apply to local institutions, however reasons for this remain unclear. They also found that the presence of a highly selective HE institution in the local area, increased the probability of application to such an institution by around 18%. Where no such institution existed in the locality, there was a decrease in the proportion of applications to a "high-tariff" institution. With the choice to remain at home whilst studying linked to social class background, this is more likely to have the impact of "restricting the choices of high-achieving students" (pg.347) who are also working-class.

When considering the construction of higher education with working class young people living in urban areas, Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall (2007:231) found that HE was positioned as "unrealistic and undesirable". The young people noted that not only was university often constructed as not being for people like them, one of the young people also outlined that HE did not fit with the financial and fashionable lifestyle they desired. The researchers suggest that despite developments to widen participation of HE to working class groups, within universities, middle class cultures – referred to as institutional habitus in Archer et al's (2007:232) paper – persist. This, they argue, diminishes the space for working class young people to feel and be themselves, contributing to them feeling excluded within the HE

landscape. Archer et al (2007) build on critique by Skeggs (2004) who focuses specifically on Black working class cultures, and the re-appropriation of cultures. They discuss how these cultures have been systematically co-opted to elevate the credibility of middle class groups. However , Skeggs (2004) argues that this link is not afforded in the reverse. These cultures are often co-opted and re-appropriated by middle class groups to wield cultural legitimacy within HE spaces; the same privilege is rarely afforded to those from working class and lower socio-economic backgrounds in relation to their own culture in selective HE spaces. Reflecting on this approach, I would argue that young people's cultures and lifestyles, where they are Black and/or of working class and lower socio-economic backgrounds, often jar against the middle class cultures, for example in HE. This friction and the (il-)legitimacy of their culture contributes to their positioning as "least-likely" to apply to HE.

Byrom (2009:209) explores the role of extra-curricular, pre-university interventions on the higher education choices of young people at a Sutton Trust Summer School. The research finds that "school-based institutional habitus and directed intervention programmes can be instrumental" in supporting young people's plans for their Higher Education futures in highly selective institutions. However, Byrom questions the intervening nature of such programs, as she finds that all the participants of the study had already actively engaged with their plans for HE. Thus, Byrom suggests that this reality may lead to an over-estimation of the impact of interventions. Byrom calls on schools, as a crucial stakeholder, to invite "most-able, least- likely" young people to attend WP events, for whom, at present, highly selective institutions do not currently feature in their expected trajectory; in such cases, these opportunities are more likely to "interrupt" their HE aspiration.

Despite its limitations, research into the HE participation motivations of "working-class" participants currently in HE, offer insights around what some working-class individuals and groups may encounter once enrolled. Bradley and Ingram (2013) outline three over-arching reasons amongst their group of current HE participants for wanting to participate in higher education: the normalisers, the drifters, and the 'determined planner'. They report being surprised to identify that those participating in HE from "working class" backgrounds were more likely to align with the mind-set of the "determined planner" also referred to as the "professional consumer". This group reported motivations for HE participation which largely

reflect a series of carefully-earmarked, rationally-driven decisions. Whilst degree subject participation is not determined by class nor socio-economic status, and the direction of any possible relationship cannot be established unequivocally, economic factors and socialisations may be more important for some "working-class" participants in their aspiration to HE. The researchers found that economic drivers were referenced far more by the "working-class" participants. This suggests that these factors were more influential to their motivations around HE participation. This may be linked to their observation that working-class young people were more likely to gravitate towards vocational courses more closely linked to future career pathways. They highlight it being "harder to find working-class recruits at Bristol University in subjects such as drama, geography and history" (Bradley & Ingram, 2013:58).

Identifying factors which perpetuate systemic class and socio-economic differences in the HE landscape remains the focus of much widening participation and social justice research. This review suggests practices throughout the education system exist which systematically affect those from working class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, contributing to fallacies in the meritocratic society. Whitty et al (2015) note that it is possible, given the relatively small proportion of pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that participate in these highly selective institutions, that these pupils may be less representative of their wider socio-economic and class background. This comparatively small population of "working-class" and/or "lower-socioeconomic" groups may only provide a narrow illustration of HE aspiration, which may favour HE as a future trajectory. Relatively few researchers have explored HE aspiration beyond those within HE, or those currently engaging with HE application. Also, discussions continue across the sector, to establish which stakeholders should be responsible for addressing differences in under-representation of working class and lower SES groups. Should initiators be the HE institutions in particular, the young people themselves, their parent, teachers, peers and supporters, as well as other key stakeholders? This thesis begins to consider these issues. It aims to contribute to knowledge of HE aspiration, by exploring with "most-able, least-likely" young people, as stakeholders of WP, prior to their formal engagement with WP. This will help to develop more nuanced knowledge of how class and socio-economic status contribute to our understanding of those "least-likely".

Summary - Social class and socio-economic status

This section has explored how working class identities and lower socio-economic status positions some in England as "least-likely" to apply to HE. It highlighted challenges within WP and social justice literature in defining labels for those from these backgrounds. From the literature, many working class young people with high academic attainment were positioned in WP research, policy and practice as incompatible with the status quo of attainment levels in school, particularly in relation to their gender identities and presentations. The review has also found that whilst lower than expected rates of HE participation were observed by Crawford (2014) in schools with higher proportions of those eligible for FSM, limited research has explored how HE aspiration is constructed by those young people. The latter sections of this review of social class and SES explored literary debates around working class young people's HE participation and WP research, policy and practice. They considered the extent to which current trends in access and engagement contribute to their positioning as "least-likely". Researchers such as Croxford and Raffe (2014), Byrom (2009) and Boliver (2013) suggested that aspects of the WP engagement, HE application and participation processes were systematically unfair for certain socio-economic and minority ethnic groups, particularly in relation to highly selective HE applications.

This review finds gaps within the literature in relation to research around those "least-likely". Minimal consideration has been given to: firstly, the dynamics and interactions between and within young people in WP research, particularly mixed gender groups, how some may be positioned in the literature as "least-likely", and the role this plays in their HE aspiration. Secondly, little is known about how young people articulate their formation of HE aspiration in education settings where high FSM eligibility rates exist as a marker of socio-economic disadvantage and relative poverty. In addition, little is known about how schools, teaching staff, WP practitioners and young people themselves, are situated as WP stakeholders of HE aspiration, and play a role in the (non-)selection process for WP activities. In light of these gaps, my research explored HE aspiration with young people, in interaction with their peers, predominantly in classroom settings of the mixed comprehensive school of Amberley Grove, where FSM eligibility over six years was at above average rates.

2.2.2.2 Minority ethnicity and race

Moving to consider how those from some ethnic backgrounds have come to be positioned as "least-likely", this section explores considers the experiences and patterns of educational attainment and HE participation of those from ethnic minority backgrounds, which sees some positioned as "least-likely" to apply. It begins by outlining the experiences and engagement of a Black female researcher within this field of research and policy. This opening sets a tone for the overall section, where the researcher considers how minority ethnicity is documented in the English education system and indicates the unease felt by the researcher, as a black female researcher educated in the English state system, in reviewing literature around ethnicity and race in the field of education. Whilst most broad ethnic minority groups are proportionally over-represented within the overall UK HE system particularly, this review finds a more nuanced pattern within the literature that sees some groups "least-likely" to apply, particularly to selective universities. The review also highlights the theoretical positioning of those from minority ethnic backgrounds in research, and how academics using critical race theory continue to examine race and ethnicity within the English education system. This, amongst other approaches, has begun to challenge and dismantle stereotypes, alongside legitimising educational success of those of minority ethnic backgrounds.

Researching minority ethnicity and race as a Black researcher

This has undoubtedly been the most difficult subsection of the thesis to write. Having sat down to write this section on minority ethnicity and race at the start of my thesis, it soon proved challenging. The mental gymnastics required to be both critical yet reflexive, both widely-read yet self- preserving, has been immense and unrelenting. As a black female, I battled with writing myself out of the narrative on how race and ethnicity positions some as "least-likely". A headline about me one day might say "Black, off-rolled, teenage, single mum was made homeless but defies the odds and gains a PhD, close to 10 years after giving birth".

Whilst this is all reflective of my story, this headline would ignore what I consider to also be crucial realities to my educational journey. Firstly, it ignores the fact that my educational experience was quite privileged. I went to an independent primary school and a selective

secondary school that consistently features in the top ten nationally for GCSE and A-Level results. It also disregards that my parents, for much of my childhood, held managerial positions in the social work sector and that their religious affiliations and social connections gave me access to black professional networks. My contradictory experience has produced a state of unease in writing a review of research on how race and ethnicity have shaped discussions on defining those "least-likely" in the English HE landscape. I remain internally-conflicted in critiquing the benefits and limitations within the English education system. Those, like me, who are given the space to critique the ethnic disparities in the English education system, are often also somewhat-benefitting products of it. For me, being Black bestows both legitimacy and illegitimacy to comment on how ethnicity and race has positioned some as "least-likely". Some of those challenges are also voiced in the preface to this thesis. How do I, as Black, ensure I do not undermine progress to positively affect change by ignorantly weighing into debates on ethnicity and race that my schooling has sought to whitewash?

Until I embarked on this literary exploration, my experience with race and ethnicity was minimally informed by exposure to sociological literature and wider social theory on the topics. From the age of 11, my formal education has been race-lite. Platt (2011:88) articulates "It is now widely accepted that 'races', in the sense of those with distinct genetic heritage, do not exist…" but "…the social 'reality' of race persists in that people act as if races exist and recognize racialized differences". The deconstruction of any genetic bases of different races is welcomed, although the social reality that Platt indicates to, is the complex approach to race in the UK education system that informed my educational experience in England. I was not unique in this. It is also the backdrop against which many young people of all ethnicities are schooled on race and ethnicity in the UK. For me, the constructs of race and ethnicity as theorised in UK social research often bears superficial resemblance to my lived experience in modern UK society.

It became increasingly important to me that I voiced my personal engagement with the research on race and ethnicity in the English HE landscape. I concluded that my best attempt at a literature review of this topic would not be in submitting to institutional norms by writing a passive review. Instead, I offer commentary on how discussions on race and ethnicity may make one "least likely to apply to university" in the active voice, wherever possible. From the

start of this research, I recognised the importance of a review of research into the role and impact of race and ethnicity in HE Aspiration to my exploration of Amberley Grove's "most-able, least-likely". It was a school where 99% of the pupil population identified with ethnicities other than that of the majority White British group. Alongside this, it was within an area of the UK – Birmingham - a city famed for its racial and ethnic diversity. Amberley Grove was a large "Outstanding" secondary school, in an ethnically diverse area with high poverty rates. Given this, it presented an interesting setting to explore how debates around those "least-likely to apply to university" can be intensified and illuminated by concepts of race and ethnicity. As around 48% of the Amberley Grove population were female, this literature review and thesis more generally, explores the social interactions around HE aspiration between genders. Whilst acknowledging feminist criticisms of social research with mixed gender groups, this thesis does not seek to minimise the voice of each gender within the research. This is in large part due to the complexities of the intersectional approaches needed to research with due diligence and disrupt the status quo (hooks 1994; Kohli, 2016; Nyachae, 2016). Rather, it begins to explore how different young people form and voice their HE aspiration in mixed-gender educational settings in Amberley Grove.

So, here I explore the research reflections on race and ethnicity that have shaped definitions of those "least-likely" to apply to higher education, particularly the most selective UK institutions. This section focuses particularly on how research into ethnicity documents the educational experiences of minority ethnic groups.

Educational experiences in the school context

Experiences of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as ethnic and racial discrimination in the education system, shape experiences within English compulsory education. The educational experiences of Black, Asian and Minority ethnic groups in the UK has largely been shaped by changing priorities and political hangovers over the last sixty years. Spanning this time, according to Arora (2005:29), the education policies linked to race and ethnicity have evolved loosely from the following: assimilation ideologies around the 1950s and 60s; integrationist ideals advocating for multi-racial, -cultural, -ethnic education of the 1970s; "a culturally plural society" of the 1980s; the Education Reform Act (1988); equality assurances and regulation of the 90s; the MacPherson report and the amended Race Relations

Act at the turn of the century; with the Equality Act 2010 amalgamating various equality legislation, and more recently the publication of the UK Race Disparity Audit (2017), critiqued in work by Pilkington (2013) and Bhopal (2020).

Ball (2017) states that only crisis breeds political consideration of topics such as race and gender, with these milestone policies and ideologies on the whole, no exception. They present a backdrop to begin to understand how young people of minority ethnic backgrounds have been and continue to be delegitimised, stereotyped and even worse bullied and racially abused in England. They signal how race and ethnicity has been a political priority over the last sixty years. Unfortunately, in these policies and reports, little has been documented about the routine experiences of discrimination and racism in education of those from minority ethnic groups. Limited consideration has been afforded in policy or practice to the stratification and impact on young people from minority ethnic groups of " 'ability' grouping, selection, and the curriculum" (Ball, 2017:102) or equal access to statutory provision in schools.

Despite limited large scale reflection and implementation of anti-racist praxis and provision to subvert ethnic disparities in policy and practice, academic research has explored the educational experiences of young people from ethnic minority groups in the UK. This section of the review considers the types of research that have been produced; the extent to which the research suggests that experiences shape higher education trajectories; and how these experiences can contribute to some groups being considered as "least-likely" to apply to HE. Scholars such as Rollock et al (2012); Bhopal & Preston (2012); Mirza & Joseph (2013) and Gillborn (2015) continue to critique how race and ethnicity interacts with the educational experiences of those from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds in the UK. They particularly focus on experiences of those with Asian, African and Caribbean backgrounds, and more recently individuals of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. An example of this can be found in the development of critical race theories in the English education context. For example, Rollock (2007) observes that Black girls are somewhat caught in a double-edged sword between femininity and ethnicity. The former contributes to them being invisible in discussions around Black attainment, with the latter delegitimising their academic success.

Exploring school experiences, utilising a black feminist intersectional framework, Mirza & Meetoo (2018) found that both schools adopted a deficit narrative of the Muslim young women in their school. The dominant challenges in one school for Muslim young women existed around the access and progression to selective higher education. This school's focus – or imposition – on empowerment and the adoption and performativity of a "post-feminist, middle-class, neoliberal individualism" (pg.235), did not translate into access nor sustained participation to Russell Group institution or higher level employment opportunities, despite the young women's relatively high academic attainment. In the other school, the prolific racist and sexist bullying of Muslim girls contributed to their high incidence of mental health issues and self-harm behaviour. The young people reported that the teachers failed to address these concerns effectively, with staff efforts focused acutely on the PREVENT agenda and safeguarding the young women from perceived community threats.

Graham (2018) outlines the psychosocial benefits of multi-ethnic diversity in schools, focusing on those in the sixth grade (approximately 11-12years). Acknowledging that diversity is not fixed, some considerations are highlighted. These include, firstly, mismatches between school-wide diversity, contrasted by class-specific diversity and additionally, differences in the ethnic diversity of the pupils outgoing and incoming school settings. Referencing work by Garces & Jayakumar (2014) on ethnic diversity on campus, findings suggest limited "meaningful numbers or meaningful representation of ethnic minorities" (pg.75) can lead to feelings of isolation and psychosocial adversity. They propose a gap in the literature around the presence of a "critical mass" (pg.74) in school level ethnic diversity, suggesting that there will be minimal benefit of ethnic diversity for any ethnic group if only small numbers of those from certain ethnic groups exist. Reflecting on abhorrent experiences such as those of the young women referenced in Mirza and Meetoo (2018), the importance of meaningful numbers and representation of groups to reinforce ethnic diversity is illuminated.

Research by Stevens (2009:417) found that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, through a complex relationship of peer signalling and teacher labelling, had varying experiences of differential treatment and racism by their teachers. Linked by a uniform inability to "to fulfil certain academic or behavioural expectations", young people were variably characterised by teachers, peers and themselves as ill, stragglers, deviants, favourites and

scapegoats. These (mis-)characterisations appeared to have a bi-directional impact on the academic engagement of the pupils, with those being mischaracterised more likely to raise concerns of racism. Stevens (2009) challenges the definition of racist incidents as proposed in the Macpherson Report (Anthias, 1999), and suggests that pedagogy and classroom roles may play a role and urges caution when addressing concerns of racism. These conclusions by Stevens (2009) contradict findings by Mirza, Bhopal and others around the experiences of racism by young people in schools. Moreover, Stevens' (2009) paper fails to address some ontological and epistemological issues around whose knowledge is heard, legitimised, critiqued and valued in the classroom, particularly in relation to those young people of ethnic minority backgrounds.

Archer (2008:98) charts how broad discourses of the ideal pupil propagate the UK education system. She documents the ways in which young people from ethnically diverse and lower socio-economic backgrounds are "Othered", even those who are high-achieving; so much so, she argues that they cannot fully own their own success. According to Archer, pupils from ethnically diverse backgrounds valued being 'strong-minded', 'loud' and 'having loads of opinions' (pg95). Whilst, young people propose these attributes as desirable amongst different ethnic groups, they were recognised as behaviours that often brought them into conflict with schools. This suggests that attributes at the individual level are becoming socialised as problematic, pathological or dismissed entirely as valued within the academic space, for some. Where this occurs, it is plausible that whole swathes of individuals may become devalued in their academic experience, their attainment be delegitimised, and result in them being dis-incentivised to pursue their educational aspirations.

Using an iterative process in which both high achieving girls' discourse was coded and analysed against Bourdieusian concepts, Wong (2012) suggests that internal conflicts existed around how they should present themselves: identity performativity (pg. 61). He proposes that this potential identity performativity may interfere with girls' science engagement and aspirations for their future and appeared to be shaped by family, peer and teacher expectations.

Careers information, advice and guidance in England's schools has been criticised for failing to offer impartial advice to all young people and potentially reproducing disparities and unequal trends in relation to gender, ethnicity and social class (Moote & Archer, 2018). Researching

young people aged 15/16, Moote & Archer found that young people are largely expected to self-refer. The researchers suggested that this is disproportionately disadvantaging some young people, for example those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Evidence for differential access to careers advice existed between ethnic groups, with researchers finding "65% of White students reported having met with a careers advisor, while only 33% of Asian students reported similar meetings"(pg.197). They also found that young people of minority ethnic backgrounds expressed a preference to discuss their academic and career plans with their parents. Trends in engagement with formal careers provision amongst those from minority ethnic backgrounds appears to continue into higher education, with them less likely to access structured provision in higher education and more likely to discuss careers with friends and family (NICEC 2003). Recognising the disparities amongst ethnic groups, consideration should be given to the extent to which racism contributes to the apprehension and exclusion of different minority ethnic groups from effective, accessible careers education. Intersectional approaches to careers information, advice and guidance may help to acknowledge the heterogeneity of pupils' plans for the future.

Policies spanning the last seventy years - largely constructed in response to crises - have shaped the political agenda of race and ethnicity within education. From neoliberal discussions to those of the ideal pupil, from (mis-)characterisations and labelling to identity performativity, discourses exist across the education system which contribute to delegitimise the academic success of ethnic minority sub-populations. This is one of the ways in which young people from minority ethnic groups become "least-likely" to participate in elite higher education. Research exploring careers provision and wider access to statutory support across the compulsory education journey in schools reflects disproportionate engagement by those from minority ethnic groups. However, much of the research in this area has focused on those in senior years of school and higher education (Moote & Archer, 2018; NICEC, 2003). Data collection methods have largely been by large scale econometric surveys and interviews with a sample. There appears to be limited research in the field exploring plans for the future of those from minority ethnic backgrounds with younger age groups and also using data collection methods which support interaction and engagement between young people.

Patterns of HE application and participation

This section discusses the HE application and participation rates amongst minority ethnic groups. It focuses on the differential HE application and participation rates, distinguished by ethnic group demographics. With most ethnic minority groups proportionally over-represented within the overall HE system, this review also interrogates nuances within the HE landscape that see those from ethnic minority backgrounds, positioned as "least-likely" to apply to selective universities. It considers how critical approaches to considering race and ethnicity within the English education system has begun to challenge and dismantle stereotypes and highlight and legitimise the educational success of those of ethnic minority backgrounds.

Gorard, Boliver, Siddiqui & Banerjee (2019), outline that ethnicity is not clearly defined and remains a contentious factor as a contextualised indicator of disadvantage in HE participation. Whilst local and national data on application and participation is largely numerical and categorical, it is readily available and tracks patterns in educational attainment and trajectories between different ethnic groups. Data from the Office for Students (2021) are presented in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Table 1. Figure 1 outlines the proportion of students that are entering higher education and indicate that on average, proportions of white students are largely decreasing, whilst general trends on participation for broad minority ethnic groups suggest marginal increases.
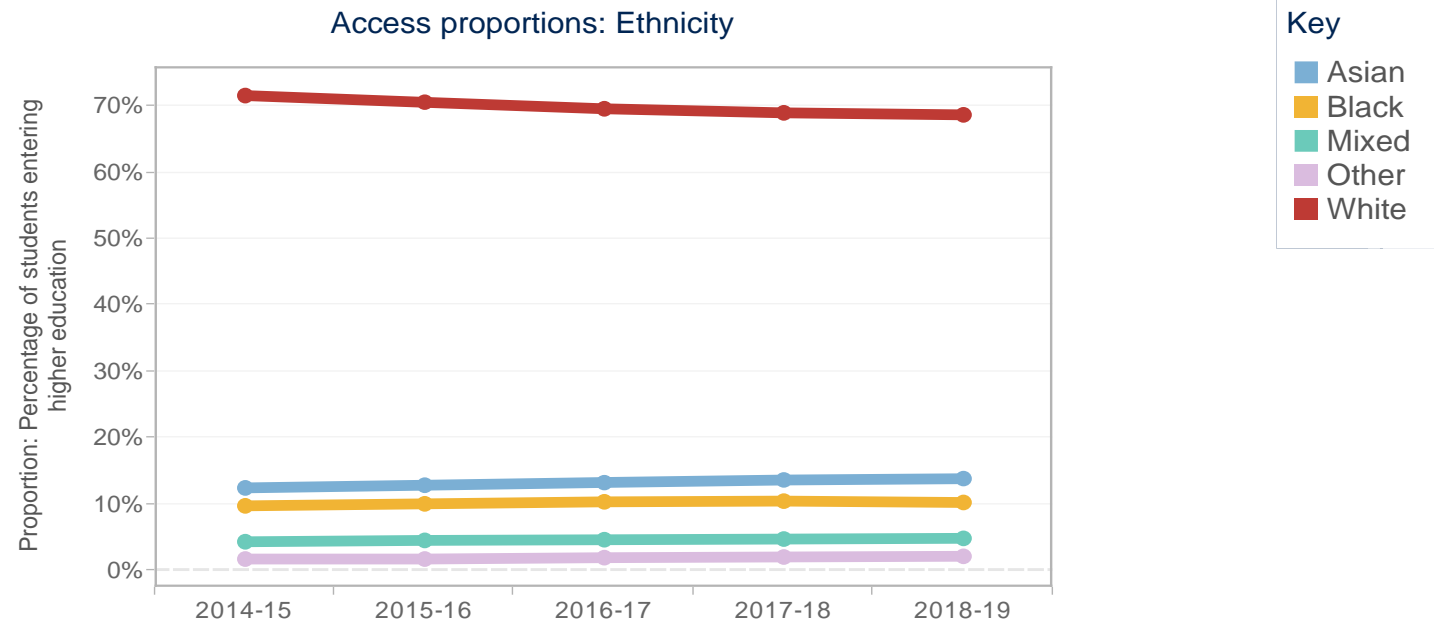
Access proportions: Ethnicity

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
	12.5%	12.9%	13.3%	13.7%	13.9%
	9.8%	10.1%	10.4%	10.5%	10.3%
	4.4%	4.6%	4.7%	4.8%	4.9%
	1.8%	1.8%	2.0%	2.1%	2.2%
	71.6%	70.6%	69.6%	69.0%	68.7%

Figure 1 - Proportion of the makeup of students entering higher education by 18/19 (%)

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/ Accessed February 2021

So why then is it important to consider how race and ethnicity position some as "most-able, least-likely"? Because whilst Figure 1 above suggests that individuals of ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to enter HE, research has found systematic differences in patterns of participation across the ethnic groups. Whilst the breakdown by ethnicity in Figure 1 suggests that proportions of broad minority ethnic groups in HE are increasing, data (for example in the Office for Students adapted content in Figure 2 and Table 1), disaggregated by minority ethnic groups, suggest that broader categories mask a different, varying picture. Proportions of Black or Black British African students are highest of all disaggregated minority ethnic groups and have been increasing over the last ten years. Similarly, proportions of Asian or Asian British Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Asian other students have been increasing, alongside all Mixed ethnic groups and those in Other ethnic groups. The proportions of Black or Black British Caribbean and Asian or Asian British Indian students have remained largely the same across the last ten years; the proportions of Asian or Asian British – Chinese students has been steadily declining. The relatively small numbers of students identifying as white Irish and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities participating in HE means that their overall proportions appear very low within Figure 2. However, Table 1 indicates that proportions of HE students identifying with these ethnicities are increasing, suggesting that their overall numbers may be increasing within HE.
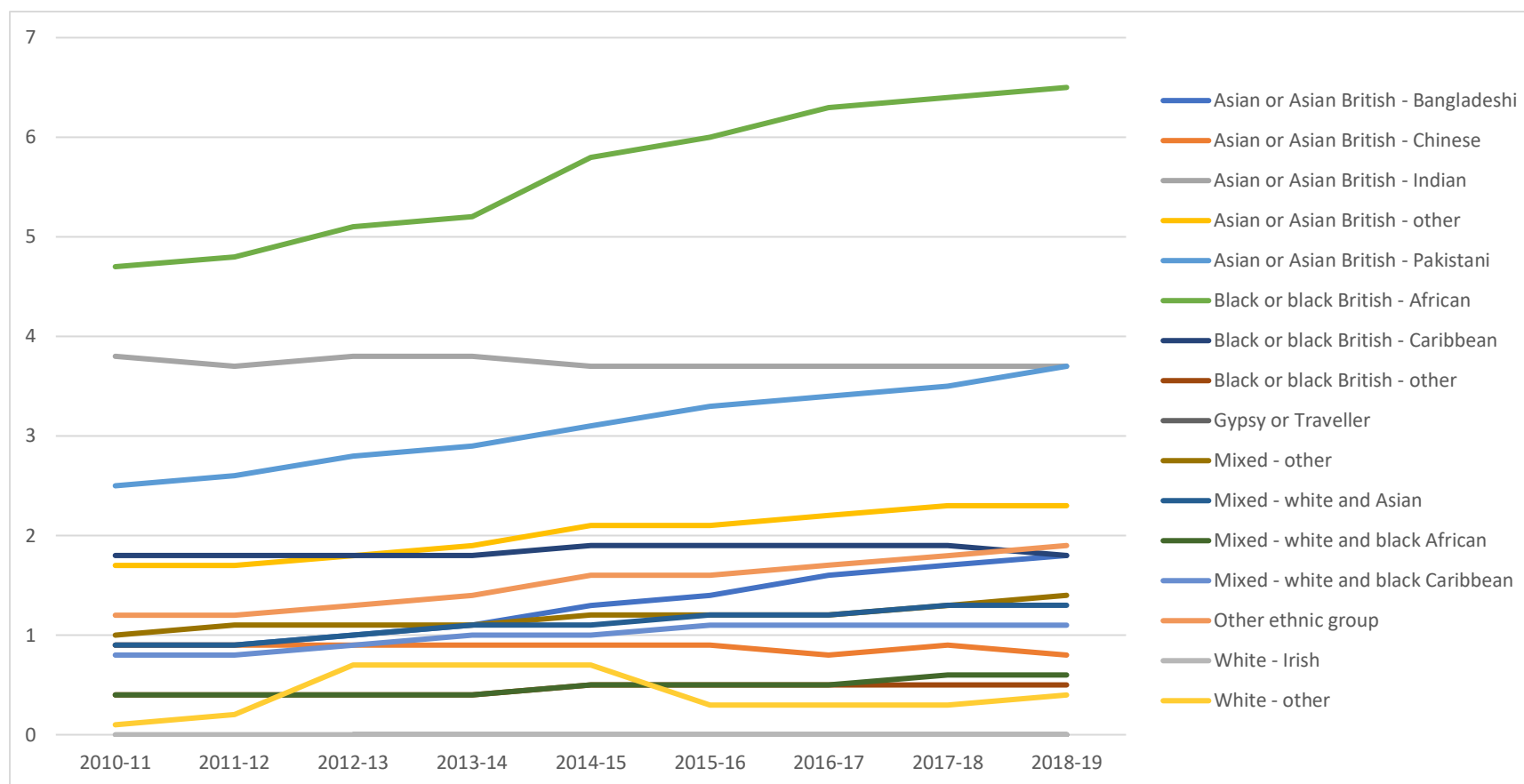
Figure 2 - Breakdown of proportions of HE Participation by disaggregated minority ethnic groups in %

Adapted from https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity-student-data/equality-and-diversity-data/

Accessed February 2021

Table 1 - Numbers of HE student enrolment

Ethnicity	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	14665	15350	15465	16185	20135	22215	25330	27800	29265
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	15195	15190	14185	13630	13350	13560	13650	13885	13860
Asian or Asian British - Indian	62380	61960	59095	58170	57325	58275	59520	60680	60930
Asian or Asian British - other	27170	28600	28300	28985	31515	33035	35500	37315	38425
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	41610	43120	43590	44425	47700	51320	54015	57235	60570
Black or black British - African	76520	79510	78980	79315	88880	93645	100915	103950	106480
Black or black British - Caribbean	29990	29575	27580	26900	28455	29230	30510	30625	29880
Black or black British - other	6300	6085	5760	5765	7280	7520	7715	7805	7845
Gypsy or Traveller			110	125	170	220	245	295	380
Mixed - other	16985	17915	17380	17430	17990	18950	20060	21020	22330
Mixed - white and Asian	14490	15665	15605	16140	16830	18010	19270	20760	21710
Mixed - white and black African	6125	6470	6490	6715	7255	7775	8475	8985	9600
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	12955	14020	13980	14505	15475	16825	18040	18575	18740
Other ethnic group	18960	19650	20255	21245	23905	25390	27505	29465	31000
White - Irish	340	255	240	255	250	265	280	435	565
White - other	2375	2555	11215	11125	10500	4150	5500	5165	6340
Grand Total	346060	355920	358230	360915	387015	400385	426530	443995	457920

Adapted from https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity-student-data/equality-and-diversity-data/

Accessed February 2021

Creating graphs to illustrate the proportions of students from broad and more granular minority ethnic groups participating in HE, offers one way to track how current patterns may mirror or differ within a cohort. Displaying Table 1 offers a way to understand how education participation amongst different ethnic groups is structurally characterised within the English political system. It highlights an example of cohort data that is often used as a pivot from which racial and ethnic educational disparities are politically and institutionally approached. However, these graphs are unable to provide the contextual information needed to develop insights into how research debates around race and ethnicity contribute to our understanding of those "least-likely to apply to higher education". Understanding how race and ethnicity positions some as "least-likely" requires more in-depth critique. Just charting the respective percentages of individuals by ethnicity who access HE, cannot explain why those of some ethnicities in the UK are considered "least-likely".

Plans are growing for the massification of the HE sector in England. An example of this potential increase can be drawn from the Office for Students' (2020) projection that HE demand will rise by 25% by 2030. Figure 2 also indicates an increasing number of students participating in HE: from 346,060 in 2010 to 457,920 in 2018. The general increase in proportions of minority ethnic groups participating in HE suggests that there may be an increased diversification of the HE sector. This may be a positive development, but only where it is also accompanied by the non-performative adoption by all stakeholders (Kimura, 2014). This development could include institutions holding and promoting a respectful, progressive and reflexive understanding of their potential applicants that ensure the voices of those currently "least likely to apply to university" are amplified rather than further potentially marginalised.

The role that ethnicity and race play in the HE participation and aspiration of young people has been the subject of much discussion in the UK HE landscape and wider society (Richardson, Mittelmeier and Rienties, 2020). Boliver (2016) finds that ethnic disparities exist in admissions offers, disadvantaging ethnic minority applicants to Russell Group universities. This may represent a unique scenario in HE participation for those "most-able, least-likely" from ethnic minority groups. It may suggest that whilst students of ethnic minorities in the UK are statistically more likely to participate in HE, where their academic achievement supersedes the cohort average, they may be inversely disenfranchised by their ethnic identity; situating them

as "least-likely". Boliver (2016:247) writes that they are "less likely to receive offers of admission than comparably qualified white applicants". This suggests that "most-able, least-likely" young people from ethnic minority backgrounds may have a unique relationship with highly selective universities, not explicitly accounted for in our current theorising. Whilst England, particularly in urban areas, remains an ethnically diverse society, little is known about the educational strategies of those at the intersections between class, race and ethnicity.

Examples of these nuanced patterns of HE application can be found in research by Shiner and Noden (2015). They found that concepts of race and ethnicity for those of minority ethnic backgrounds in the UK, may mediate patterns of those "least-likely", beyond dimensions of class and socio-economic status. White British applicants applied to HE institutions evenly across the HE hierarchy, whilst applicants from most Asian groups applied more readily to elite and high-ranking institutions. This was except Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups, who alongside those of Black heritage, were most likely to apply to lower ranking institutions. They also found interesting application patterns amongst different ethnic groups. They found that whilst Pakistani and Bangladeshi HE applicants targeted institutions concordant with class-based patterns of HE application, applicants with Black heritage and applicants with Chinese heritage appeared to subvert the status quo. HE applicants of Black heritage, on average, applied to respectively lower tariff institutions, compared with their inferred social status, whilst HE applicants of Chinese heritage, on average, displayed an inverse pattern. Social status was inferred primarily by parents' occupational group. Platt (2011) indicates that traditional English notions of class may not be directly comparable to those of ethnic minority backgrounds and this may have limitations for explaining patterns of applications for many black and minority ethnic groups. For those of ethnic minorities, there appears to be additional dimensions, beyond class and SES, that see some systematically more or less likely to apply to highly selective institutions.

Figures suggest that patterns exist across ethnic groups. Research has begun in earnest to enlighten our understanding of HE participation of various ethnic groups in the UK context (Callender & Jackson, 2005); Modood, 2006, 2012; Rollock et al, 2012; Warmington, 2012; Arday, 2018; and Williams, Bath, Arday & Lewis, 2019). However, this research in the field of UK widening participation tends to focus on those already within HE, or with expressed

intention to participate. This suggests that there may be room within the literature to critically explore the HE aspiration of sub-populations at younger ages (Turner, 2020). I advocate that these insights should also be from those of groups with varying plans for the future, not just aspiration solely for HE. There also appears to be limited research within the field where young people self-define their ethnic identity; rather, categorical labels around what most aligns to the student's identity are proposed and published. In light of this absence, this research recognises a need to consider ethnic identity within a multi ethnic school context, where young people are given opportunities to self-define. Indicated by contradictions around the HE participation proportions and rates of minority ethnic groups in HE, this review recognises a gap within the literature around how young people from minority ethnic backgrounds consider their own progression to HE. There may be an opportunity to research with young people from minority ethnic sub-groups, which can help to challenge misplaced assumptions and offer nuance to how young people of different ethnic groups become "least-likely".

Positioning of those from minority ethnic backgrounds in research

This section considers how the research and voices of those from minority ethnic backgrounds are positioned within the fields of WP and education research. It begins with outlining the types of research that have been produced on race and ethnicity in the field, and then discusses the ontological positioning of those from minority ethnic groups within research. It then considers how we may move beyond this dominant deficit approach to amalgamate and reposition the voices of those from minority ethnic backgrounds within research.

Stevens, Mau & Crozier (2019) present a review of education research into ethnic and racial inequality in England's educational provision between 1990 and 2010. They distinguish between five major types of research traditions in the field; "Political Arithmetic Tradition" (2019:431); approaches drawing mainly from Critical Race Theory; "School Effectiveness and School Inclusion" (2019:448); "Culture and Educational Outcomes tradition"; and "Educational Markets and Educational Outcomes tradition". Sifting through the multiple references to the problematic nature of educating African Caribbean pupils with "Black Caribbean students [remaining] a group of concern as they start well behind" (Stevens et al, 2019:449), proved difficult reading as a Black Caribbean mother and researcher. Their overview shines an ominous light on a wider challenge for researchers exploring ethnic and racial inequalities in

the English education system; their research offers limited researcher reflexivity. This is ironically in a research context where deficit narratives dominate debates around students of minority ethnic backgrounds. I find myself reading their research internally asking, like Spivak (1988), "Can the subaltern speak?". Examples such as Stevens et al's research, have a place in shaping our understanding of how discourses of race and ethnicity interact with our definitions of those "least-likely". However, the development and promotion of rigorous critical and reflexive theory is also imperative to bridge any current gaps between the socialised, lived experience of race and ethnicity in education, alongside empirical and theoretical education research. It may just be my reading of it, but it appears to amplify that the study of race and ethnicity in the English context is, in varying degrees, predominantly through a viewing lens that detaches the observer of race and ethnicity in education, from the observed. Researchers from Spivak (1988) to Stevens et al (2019), amongst many others less likely to receive offers of admission than comparably qualified white applicants call for research space that considers intersectional approaches to understanding and tackling inequities in the education context. Rollock et al (2015) advocate caution in the use and potential misuse of the term 'Intersectionality', first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1990). Intersectionality in this context, refers to how "multiple forms of inequality and identity interrelate in different contexts and over time, e.g. the interconnectedness of race, class... and so on" (Gillborn et al, 2015:2). Rooted in work by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is discussed in relation to the role of race – the social construction – and gender, in the erasure and discrimination of Black women. Intersectionality is arguably key to considerations with a variety of groups within society (Richardson et al, 2020). In the interrogation of intersectionality in its interactional form, as imagined by Crenshaw (1990), the role of power dynamics contributes to the perpetuation of oppression and injustice. However, the role of power has been afforded limited critique into the exploration of young people's aspirations against the backdrop of lower socio-economic disadvantages and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Contemporaries such as Burke (2002) and Harman (2017) argue that power relations between groups in WP are minimised: with the notion of power even sometimes completely omitted. Failing to recognise the role of power in perpetuating socio-economic disadvantages, racism and ethnic discrimination as well as other social injustices, may have consequences for understandings of HE participation and aspiration. How power relations and hierarchies are

experienced by young people within WP research, policy and practice has been given limited critical exploration. This review recognises that the roles of the school, teacher, researcher, the young people and other stakeholders of WP and HE aspiration are not independent, but rather their roles are shaped by constructs of power, and they are evolving and reflexive in relation to HE aspiration.

Uprichard (2010) discusses a contradiction in a critical examination of contemporary theorising around research with children as a mismatch between theory and research practice. It is argued that whilst researchers theoretically position children as "active agents... when we examine the way that children are empirically involved in social research, we see another story" (pg.5). They acknowledge that research in which children inform childhood should undoubtedly continue. In much the same way, I am firm in my opinion that research exploring ethnically and racially diverse knowledges about race and ethnicity should continue in earnest in the struggle to overturn systemic social injustice and racism.

However, like Uprichard's critique of children's current empirical involvement in social research, I feel there is a growing need to establish a larger body of research in the UK in which marginalised populations contribute to research fields beyond their marginalisation. I have researched with those least-likely, not as means to explore specifically why they may or may not participate in HE, but to explore how they can illuminate our understanding of aspiration, with a focus on HE. The former would position HE aspiration as a binary choice, whilst the latter offers an opportunity for those on the fringes, to offer a unique viewpoint and contribute to knowledge on aspiration. This review highlights the ontological contradiction in social research. It emphasises that these young people with intersecting identities are, and will be seen as, an essential topic of study, over and above their interactions with factors seen as specific to their direct experience. This thesis advocates that, for example, those who identify with ethnicities other than a majority White-British group should be consulted on environmental, social and political issues more generally, or as in my research, young people's formation of their HE aspiration. They should not just be consulted on factors that may be seen to disproportionately affect their community such as race, ethnicity and cultural diversity. This may also begin to subvert the positioning of certain groups in society as destitute, problematic and deficient.

This thesis, through its consideration of how aspiration is formed by young people, aims to challenge the construction of research which sees "least-likely" populations as intrinsically deficient. It also intends to trigger further critique of the arbitrary use of mainstream research populations. The experiences of those "least-likely" are heterogeneous. As such our understanding of HE aspiration requires knowledge from a variety of individuals, about which there is largely a gap in the research. To begin to address these gaps, my research considered experiences of young people aged 11-14, with high-prior attainment, from a diverse multi-ethnic community, in an English school with high levels of economic deprivation. I asked what role do their peer interactions play in shaping their HE aspirations? I posed this question because my review finds that currently, theoretical and empirical approaches which illuminate our understanding of how race and ethnicity influence educational experience in the UK, does not extend to theorising the role of peer interactions around HE aspirations in WP research.

Despite the research developments outlined above, there is still room to develop understandings of aspiration for those "least-likely", using different theoretical and methodological underpinnings. My conceptual framework, as outlined at the end of this chapter, presents the notion that aspiration formed at intersections may tell us more than we have theoretically appreciated before. My research worked with an ethnically-diverse group of pupils, as a means to explore and hopefully amplify the voice of a potentially "marginalised" group in society and widening participation research. I make tentative use of the term "marginalised", stemming from an ontological unease with defining groups as such, where these labels have not been self-ascribed. There appears to be a gap in the literature which explores the educational experiences and peer interactions of young people from lower socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds. This thesis considers how those holding intersecting identities such as these, form HE aspiration in interaction with their peers in an educational context. I ask, when we attempt to account for a multitude of socially-dynamic, politically-charged factors such as attainment, the "marginalising" effects of ethnicity, race, school culture, poverty and socio-economic status, what can this group of young people tell us about their aspirations, in interaction with their peers?

Summary – Minority ethnicity and race

To begin, this review considered the educational experiences of those of ethnic minority groups, and how those of ethnic minority and racial backgrounds in England often have their educational successes delegitimised within schools. It explored the impact that such experiences may have on one's likelihood and affinity? to participate in HE, particularly selective institutions.

Section 2.2.1 then explored patterns of HE application and progression. I noted that whilst many minority ethnic groups are consistently overrepresented in their participation in HE, some groups are consistently under-represented across the sector. I also found that proportions of participation vary across minority ethnic groups with most groups notably under-represented in selective institutions. It is this distinction of who goes where, and even who studies what, that contributes to those of ethnic minority backgrounds often being positioned as "least-likely".

This review also considered the theoretical positioning of those of ethnic minority and racial backgrounds in WP research, and how it contributes to many being positioned as "least-likely". I argued that research about the ethnic and racial experiences of particular groups should continue, in order to offer insights in to ways to redress social injustice. However, I noted that there appears to be limited literature in which those of marginalised groups inform our understanding of research concepts, beyond their own marginalisation, such as ethnicity. I argued that this contributes to their voice being somewhat muted within WP research. I further argued that it is racial and ethnic discrimination and the minimal inclusion of voices of these groups that contributes to many being positioned as "least-likely". My research challenges the field to develop research which maximises the participant voice on HE aspiration and in wider WP research.

2.3   Higher Education aspiration

This section offers a critical insight into the political, institutional and academic climate that drives discussion around the Higher Education aspiration of those "most-able, least-likely" to apply to Higher Education. I explore aspiration as it pertains to Higher Education as an overriding theme. This focus stems from an interest in the study and sociology of Education.

But the review moreover considers the term HE aspiration – aspiration being the hope or ambition of achieving (Lexico, 2019) – to reflect a multi-faceted concept beyond just plans for an educational post-18 university trajectory. It aims to explore what may define and shape young people's HE aspiration, and include this knowledge within a wider evolving definition of HE aspiration; one that aims to move away from deficit notions of aspiration towards a definition that also gives voice to the young people it seeks to engage with.

To encompass this broad understanding of HE aspiration, I begin this section from three general insights and with the view that the notions of aspiration which have been explored in this review are not entirely distinct categories but broadly inter-connected., I draw here on work by Archer, DeWitt & Wong (2014:58). They offer three interesting approaches to research on aspiration. Firstly, they suggest that aspiration may "provide a probabilistic indication of a young person's future occupation". Second, aspiration constitutes a clear focus of concern within education policy. The idea that differential rates of educational participation and achievement might be due (in part) to a poverty of aspiration among some working-class and minority ethnic groups, has received considerable attention within UK policy over the past decade. Indeed, the problem of low aspirations has featured in the White papers and educational policy-making of both the previous New Labour (e.g. DfES 2003), the Coalition governments (e.g. DfE 2014, 2015) and more recent administrations, indicated in an official blog by Ofsted (2018). Third, and finally, they view aspiration as being of sociological interest – as socially constructed phenomena that provide a way to examine "the interplay between agency and social structures within young people's lives" (Archer et al, 2014:59).

Spurred by this triad of aspiration, this section considers three interconnected facets of aspiration in social research. These are :

- Aspiration as young people's knowledge about future education, particularly Higher Education, career progression, success and the value of education

- Aspiration as School, Government, HE and other Institutional Widening Participation policy, initiatives and practice

- Aspiration as a wider socially-constructed concept of the future self

The terms knowledge and concept are used throughout the thesis. When using the term knowledge, I am referring broadly to what young people express; throughout the review and the wider thesis this is shaped and relayed in a reflexive relationship between the young people and the researcher. This use of the term knowledge is particularly in light of Mayall (2008), who writes that adults must "take account of children's knowledge in the work of trying to understand relationships between social groups (pg. 109)". I aim to consistently refer to the young people's knowledge, rather than using other terms such as understanding or perspective. These latter terms imply a sense of transience, subjectivity and inferiority on the part of the young people. This potentially subdues the young people's voice, which stands in conflict with the aim, through this research, to extend opportunities to explore what HE aspiration is, by researching HE aspiration with young people. However, I recognise that ontological and epistemological considerations when researching with children and young people, extend far beyond alterations in WP discourse. Rather I aim to offer space for preliminary reflections which highlight the use of aspiration discourse in WP research, and by whom. Where the thesis refers to the term concept in relation to HE aspiration, it is focusing on the wider idea presented within the review, of features of the three part conceptualisation of HE aspiration. It is envisaged as a wider consideration of HE aspiration, as shaped and expressed by all stakeholders of aspiration.

As part of each subsection, I consider which are the key stakeholders that play a role in the construction of HE aspiration for young people. I outline which stakeholders appear to be important for young people in considering HE aspiration, particularly during school interactions. To summarise the literature on the three key aspects of HE aspiration, section 2.3.4 concludes by detailing a conceptualisation of how HE aspiration is formed and defined for this research.

2.3.1 Aspiration as young people's knowledge about future education, particularly higher education, career progression, success and the value of education

The process of applying to higher education, for some, starts at a very young age. For these applicants, not only are their GCSE and A-Level subjects strategically and/or systematically

chosen to optimise their higher education (HE) choices, but in many cases, the secondary, and even sometimes the primary, school they attend has been a well-thought through process in a long-term goal of enhancing that pupil's university options. A prominent voice in the field of widening participation research, Diane Reay (1998) suggests that these individuals may be considered as those in the "always knowing" camp when it comes to making higher education choices. However, Reay, also references another group in her 1998 paper; those who have "never been sure".

My research reflects on those "always knowing" and those "never being sure" as discussed by Reay, and beyond, in light of the odds of HE participation. However, rather than explicitly exploring distinctions between the two poles, I am interested in exploring how both sentiments manifest and fluctuate within and between peer interactions of "most-able but least likely" young people. This section of the review considers literature on young people's knowledge about future education particularly HE, career progression, the legitimacy of their success and the value they place on education. These studies largely separate into two methodological approaches; large econometric studies or relatively small scale qualitative explorations. With my research being conducted in a school with high levels of socio-economic deprivation, where nearly all the pupils identify with ethnicities other than White British, this section also considers the literary context under which aspiration has been positioned, for young people from lower socio-economic and multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Large econometric studies in the field of WP have found differing patterns of HE aspiration amongst young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, Platt & Parsons (2018) found that children in the UK from ethnic minority groups aspire to higher paid jobs compared with ethnic majority counterparts of the comparative sex. They also found that there was a marked difference in occupational aspiration, with higher aspirations amongst ethnic minority children from as young as age 7, when compared with their white counterparts. Nevertheless, from this research, higher occupational aspiration amongst ethnic minority groups does not generally appear to convert into higher occupational returns at 25, except for Indian young women. Given the differential patterns in aspiration between ethnic groups in the UK, research continues in earnest to explore how aspiration may vary along these intersections.

The West Midlands locality, where my research was based, was the focus of research by Strand & Winston (2008). It explores the educational aspiration of young people in inner city schools. Their findings outline that across all groups, the aspiration for academic success does not directly translate into actual academic performance. Strand and Winston report educational aspiration being higher for those of other ethnic groups compared to the white British group. They suggest that factors such as the risk of unemployment and the prospect of young people of ethnic minority groups facing racial discrimination by entering the workplace directly from compulsory education, may result in higher inclination for them to remain in education post-16. However, they are cautious in generalising their findings wider, noting that the social composition of this inner urban area is systematically different to England as a whole. White British groups in inner areas are made up of predominantly lower socio-economically positioned groups and as we have found, lower socio-economic status is linked to lower academic attainment and future participation at HE.

Gutman & Schoon (2012) also noted an unexpected finding; young people with less concrete career aspirations tended to display higher academic performance and an increased likelihood of pursuing post-compulsory education. This was compared to their peers with more concrete career aspirations. However, the direction of this relationship remains unclear. It may be possible that those with generally higher academic performance may be presented with wider options for their career aspirations. This, in turn, could lead to greater indecision about their plans beyond compulsory education. Moreover, according to research in England by Mazenod, Hodgen, Francis, Taylor & Tereshchenko (2019), there may be a link between young people's HE aspirations and their attainment groupings. Not only this, but Crawford (2014) found a correlation between academic performance at 16 and HE participation, echoing the notion that high academic performance is indicative of higher level study. Khattab (2014), drawing on data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) panel survey, proposed a new classification of educational aspirations, expectations and achievement. In Khattab's research, whilst for some these concepts merge, they found that for the majority of young people, these concepts do not continuously overlap. Khattab suggests that academic success does not necessarily correlate with the development of high aspirations or expectations.

However, unlike the large econometric studies considered above, such as Platt & Parsons (2018) and Khattab (2014), previous research by Basit (1996) recognises that the aspirations of young people from different ethnic backgrounds also require more nuance than large cohort studies can offer. Basit (1996) explores career aspirations of British Asian Muslim girls; all originating from Pakistan, Bangladesh or East Africa, as well as their parents and teachers in three schools. Conducted in the mid 90s, this study challenges some of the stereotypes held about their aspiration. She comments on the hypocrisy of some staff within the schools, who interpret marriage and a career as "mutually exclusive" (pg.233) for the girls. This is despite many staff themselves being both married and pursuing a career. One teacher even suggests that it was only the high ability British Asian girls who were interested in pursuing a career and that the others were focused solely on marriage. The girls recognised and expressed that these inconsistencies contributed to them receiving career advice that differed from that given to those of the White-British majority.

Basit suggests "…it is too easily assumed that ability and potential are static and permanent…" (pg.239) by careers staff. Basit advocates for pupils as early as Year 7 to be better motivated and supported to work harder by careers teachers throughout their schooling. This would be accompanied by clear advice on what grades are required to develop a particular educational and occupational trajectory and this would also help them to achieve their high aspirations. She concludes that "schools could exploit parental interest" (pg.240), develop their home-school partnership and community engagement to develop role models for young people. In general, this study suggests that the staff displayed stereotypical and outdated ideas about the educational and career aspirations of the young people. It is argued that these hampered the further education and career guidance that they received. Where British Asian Muslim girls receive advice that is poorly or stereotypically tailored to their educational and vocational needs, then it is possible that this guidance falls short in assisting them to effectively explore their aspirations. This mismatch in their guidance may be one of the ways in which they are positioned as "least-likely" to apply to HE.

Developing on Basit's research, Archer's (2002) "Change, Culture and Tradition" also explores plans of British Asian Muslim pupils after leaving secondary school. The ethnic identities of the young people in Archer's study are subsumed under a Muslim umbrella, despite this being a

religious identity. There is a reference to the ethnic breakdown of the schools with largely Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, one with 80%, two with 30% and the other with 10%. The pupils' class identities "were identified by teaching staff as coming from broadly 'working-class' families" (pg.363). Archer questions not only the idea that their "educational choices are rational and individualistic" (pg.359), but also explores the discourse which positions these girls' post-16 choices as "restricted" due to perceived social, religious and cultural pressures. Archer explains that she is less interested in the actual choices of the female students. Instead, she is keen to explore how these choices are constructed, shaped or perceived by the students themselves. Archer reports at length about the boys' knowledge that as boys, they would progress into the world of further education, irrespective of their academic attainment. According to the boys, those girls who supposedly did not achieve as well as other girls, may stay at home "watching the tea" (pg.364). Archer notes that these assertions interestingly conflicted with their reported awareness of actually knowing any girls who may follow this trajectory post-16. Archer reports that for the boys,' it all depends on their parents really".

With respect to the girls' knowledge around their own, or other British Asian Muslim girls' post-16 choices, they "emphasised their own agency and choice in post-16 decision-making…" (pg367). That these girls do not go to college, was strongly rejected by almost all the young women in Archer's participant group. Instead, the majority disagreed that their cultures were restrictive and said their parents would support whatever choices they made, particularly if these were to involve education. The girls talked about barriers and parental reservations about them entering further education and the workplace. However, these apprehensions were not only discussed in terms of gendered, socio-cultural and religious expectations, but also with respect to fears around potential racial hostility towards the girls. In contrast to their parents' apprehensions, the girls talked about these reservations in retrospective terms – for them, the obstacles are no longer ones that they or their parents face. Despite the pupils' dismissal of their parents' reservations and barriers to their education and career plans as retrospective, Archer, DeWitt & Wong's (2014) study did find evidence that, even by the age of 12 and 13, "children are already sensitive to, and situating themselves within, quite complex gendered, classed and racialised inequalities and identities, which render particular jobs as more possible and desirable than others" (pg.68). According to Archer et al (2014), drawing on work by Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Reay 2001 and Archer and Yamashita 2003, "…as

children get older, they are increasingly likely to learn their place" (73), with young people beginning to align their aspiration with trajectories they can both imagine and those which remain realistic.

Focusing specifically on science careers, Wong (2015) also explores the aspirations of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds through smaller scale case study research. Building on research which finds an underrepresentation of minority ethnic individuals working in science in the UK, Wong (2015) considers why these pupils are more likely to adopt aspiration to, and careers related to science, for example medical doctors, engineers and IT developers, rather than occupations in science, like research scientists. Careers from science were reported to be more financially-stable, recognisable and elicited greater family and community support for the young people particularly from British-Indian, -Pakistani and -Bangladeshi backgrounds. Chinese students often expressed family support for careers in the financial sector. In Wong's research, the Black Caribbean boys, possibly coincidentally, were the only group to express aspiration for science careers. Echoed by Riegle-Crumb, Moore, & Ramos-Wada (2011), for the students of minority ethnic backgrounds in Wong's (2015) research, studying and succeeding at science subjects was largely to fulfil education and career aspirations in subjects allied to science; aspirations within the science discipline were relatively few within the sample. Wong calls for "readily available counter discourses" to subvert prolific "gendered and racialized discourses of scientists (pg.19)".

Yosso (2005) considers different types of capital that those of minority ethnic backgrounds may wield to facilitate their aspiration. Yosso (2005) writes that aspirational capital is particularly abundant in individuals from ethnic minorities. It interacts with all other forms of capital and is leveraged to acquire community cultural wealth. However, Basit (2012) highlights a challenging paradox within the institutionalised notion of aspiration in the UK, particularly for those of minority ethnic backgrounds. Basit (2012) argues that in the UK educational context, aspirational capital is delegitimised, amplifying notions of a power struggle in the wielding of capital for those of minority ethnic backgrounds. According to Basit, where aspirational capital is held by minority ethnic families, the aspiration moreover is viewed as intrinsically flawed. It may be labelled as unrealistically high (Basit, 1996); minimal and unfocused (Crozier, 2005); or inflated and too specific (Archer and Francis, 2006). This

mischaracterisation of aspirational capital as problematic, often leads to institutional moral panic; for example that their aspirations are too high or unsustainable. This panic, the literature suggests, contributes to an institutional validation for the regulation of young people's aspiration, particularly those from ethnic backgrounds other than the White-British majority, and necessitates that they make appropriate aspirations.

The sense of uncertainty, risk and compromise expressed earlier in the review by Reay (1998) is also echoed by Bok (2010) in the exploration of HE Aspiration of young people from a lower socio-economic status (SES) area. Bok (2010) explores the attitudes and aspirations of 11 and 12 year olds living in an Australian rust-belt community. Using interrelated tasks, Bok explores at the home and classroom levels "how students from a school in an area categorised as low SES are able to imagine and articulate their aspirations to HE and their broader understandings of the 'good life'" (pg.164). Bok finds negligible evidence for the premise that young people or their parents hold low aspirations; they almost exclusively profess notions of aspirations to the good life. However, Bok does note that a teacher articulates "ethical tensions" of reconciling students' high aspirations with their current academic achievement; "this teacher sees reason to develop more achievable outcomes" (pg.175). For Bok, the capacity to aspire to HE for those from lower SES backgrounds is like doing a play without a script; a metaphor by which the students become actors and their performance has no rehearsal and needs improvisation.

Class and socio-economic status are also front and centre of Stahl's (2015) exploration of aspiration. For Stahl, the working-class boys in his study, "experienced an ongoing reflexive process of internalisation of possibilities, shaped by the conditions of both material poverty and a poverty of opportunity" (pg.133). Money and financial stability, contribute to the boys' desire for trade work that was easy to obtain. Academic success, however, was reported as not only generally out of reach, but far from desired. Any empowering nature of qualifications was quickly dismissed by repeated reference to "celebrities without qualifications such as Richard Branson, Cristiano Ronaldo and David Haye" (pg.142) who had flourished financially with minimal education. Sporting aspirations were popular; only one realistic, others significantly less so. However, Stahl more widely notes two distinct career trajectories that are internalised by the boys: the idealistic, alongside the realistic.

Studies such as Khattab (2014) and Platt & Parsons (2018), where ethnic groups are unequivocally compared in relation to rates of aspiration, add to dominant discourses which see aspiration as cumulative or proportionate; high, low or otherwise. This ultimately contributes to defining and pitching winners against losers; one becomes superior and thriving, another deficient and lacking. Alternatively, work by Basit (1996), Wong (2015) and Riegle-Crumb, Moore, & Ramos-Wada (2011) focuses on the aspiration of the young people of ethnic minority backgrounds more as a specific topic of study. Bok (2010) and Stahl (2015) also illuminate our understanding of aspiration through the consideration of pupils of working class identities. These researchers place less emphasis on comparing the aspiration of these groups to the ethnic and class majority groups. Rather, they consider features of aspiration, and explore the roles of other stakeholders in shaping these. These researchers find little, if not any, evidence of low aspirations amongst the pupils.

For Basit (1996), British Asian Muslim girls were often failed by their institutions. Basit argues that staff were reluctant to equip them with tailored educational and career advice because of the misguided stereotypes held by many staff. Bok (2010), also emphasised the role that stakeholders play in shaping young people's aspiration. Bok finds that teachers held a somewhat moral obligation to balance educational and vocational aspirations with pupils' current and recent attainment. For Archer (2002), conflicting reports existed between gender groups as to the educational and vocation aspirations of British Asian Muslim girls. The boys expressed that high attaining girls would pursue further education and careers, similar to the responses of teachers in Basit's study. Instead the girls refuted the notion that they would not be able to access further education and pursue career aspirations, and they also reported that their families were supportive of their plans. They did however express gendered, socio-cultural and religious expectations alongside possible reservations from their parents about future racial hostility in education and the workplace; they were dismissive of these, discussing them as retrospective. Archer et al (2014) find that the girls' parental reservations, may not be unfounded, as the researchers find evidence of racialised, gendered and class based patterns of educational and vocational aspirations.

Wong (2015) considers the aspiration of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds within a specific educational discipline: science. He found that these young people overwhelming

wanted to study subjects and work in careers allied to science, rather than finding a particular affinity with the career as a scientist. However, Wong suggests that it was not low aspirations that the young people appeared to display, but differing priorities and expectations around financial stability, esteem and wider familial support. Similar findings are also suggested by Stahl (2015), although he also adds that academic success was placed as undesirable and unattainable by those in his study. For Yosso (2005), aspiration is explored as a capital resource. Basit (2012) commenting on this notion, argues that where it is held by those of minority ethnic backgrounds in the UK, it is delegitimised and invalidated to minimise its value in supporting the aspirations of young people from these backgrounds.

Sparked by findings related to the role of friends and peers on the HE choices of young people, for example by Roberts & Allen (1997) and Connor et al (1999), Brooks (2003b) explored the nature of peer discussions around HE choices with fifteen 16 to 18 year olds using interviews. Whilst the notion that peers impact plans for the future appears anecdotally intuitive, Brooks was surprised to find that the young people's conversations with peers about their HE choices were almost non-existent; they did not hold lengthy discussions with their friends and peers about them. Difficulties around interacting with peers included young people's prioritising their own choice in their HE decision-making, alongside their ever-increasing awareness of peers as potential competitors in the HE process and as direct comparators in relation to their HE aspirations. These were indicative of "the hierarchical positioning of HE options" (pg254): courses, institutions and future careers. The young people did not freely engage in discussion around HE. The constraint to discuss HE choice with their peers was stark and "in only a few cases did the young people cite their friends as direct sources of information about HE" (pg.255). As such, Brooks is a sceptic of careers activity models that rely on "a cascade model of information flow" (ibid.) or group activities. She suggests that they may be predicated with tensions between friends and peers. Brooks, in light of Ball et al (2002), is reluctant in suggesting further individual responsibility in the HE decision-making process, but cautions careers advisers to be considerate of the hierarchical undertones which the process of HE choice elicits. Brooks concluded that peer discussions around HE are fundamentally problematic and that young people face competing demands between their desire for individualisation and the institutionalised, peer and academic hierarchies shaping their HE choice.

These small scale studies provide space to discuss how pupils engage with institutional stakeholders and the role that these stakeholders play in acting as moderators of aspiration. It appears from the literature that young people of ethnic minority and working class backgrounds hold aspirations for competitive study and careers. Overall, they express familial and cultural support in these aspirations, although the popularity for particular courses and career aspirations vary across groups. However, teachers, career staff, and other school stakeholders, appear to moderate these aspirations; marginalise their advice; or minimise the legitimacy of the pupils' plans, to regulate expectations, based on their own stereotypes.

2.3.2 Aspirations as Government, HE and other Institutional Widening Participation policy, initiatives and practice

This section considers the role of governmental and HE institutional policy in shaping definitions of aspiration. It considers the role that institutions play in creating a narrative of young people's aspiration that views them as lacking and deficient. It also considers challenges to these framings within the literature from work by those such as Bourdieu (1986), Khattab (2015) and Harrison (2018). It concludes by considering how this thesis adds to the literature around challenging deficit narratives within institutional approaches of HE aspiration towards a deeper reconsideration.

Aspirations have featured as a cross-party political priority for some time in the UK. As early as the 2003 White Paper - The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003) outlined the government's "raising aspirations" agenda. This was famously accompanied by the reintroduction of a financial grant to young people from low-income families: the since obsolete Education Maintenance Allowance. It states:

> "It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to higher education, and whose aspirations are low, are supported both in achieving their full potential before university, and in aspiring to go on to further study. (pg. 69)"

A paper released by the Cabinet Office (2008), makes a summary and assessment of "Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities". It considers links between attainment and aspirations, particularly in socio-economically deprived communities

and the role that policies and governmental organisations can play in "raising aspirations" at a community level. It presents "The cultural capital framework" (pg. 13) that outlines a cyclical relationship between attitudes, aspirations and values, alongside behavioural change. This framework draws largely on functional and rational interpretations of the concept of cultural capital drawn firstly by Coleman (1987, 1988) and developed by Putnam (1993). However, capitals are not mutually exclusive cumulative resources as Putnam and Coleman's approach would suggest: an approach echoed in the Cabinet Office policy report (2008) and popular across the political and HE field. Consideration of Bourdieu's notion of capital where capitals are wielded against a societal backdrop of power struggles for control of assets and influence is also important. For Webb et al (2017:144), "...a Bourdieusian understanding of capital (whether it be social, cultural, symbolic or economic) is relational; it presumes that capital is a resource employed in the power play of a field". Arguably, these power dynamics play a role in the moderation, constraint and competition between individuals and groups for educational and vocational outcomes. The omission of these power relations reflects a lack of recognition of the theoretical underpinnings involved in the development of the concepts of capital, and how these relations shape educational attainment, aspirations, values and attitudes. Webb et al (2017) in their critique of institutions for merging concepts which have evolved from contrasting theoretical underpinnings without due diligence, put it simply: "...higher education as a social field is... rarely properly and fully taken to task" (pg.144). They articulate a conflict within and between widening participation policy, practice and research around the conceptual framing of capital, and its role in young people's aspirations.

The Cabinet Office (2008) paper recognises the role of "parents, peers and role models, neighbours, schooling and workplace and the wider society-wide influences acting upon us (such as the economy, technology, media and development of new ideas and innovations" (pg.13). Parents were evidenced as the strongest influence on aspirations, with examples to indicate the important influence of others on aspiration such as friends, media and society, teachers and the community. However, except for in the case of community, it is unclear from the research what influence that these groups play in shaping the young people's aspiration. Evidence is only presented to signal the importance of the community - from young people themselves - in shaping aspiration: "The way the area looks. Rubbish... it makes you feel

ashamed that this is where you're from (pg.36)". The influence of the other groups on young people's aspirations are signalled by parents and educational practitioners.

The Cabinet Office paper suggests that external factors such as social and environmental considerations were intertwined with aspirations. They also find that self-esteem, self-efficacy, inspiration and information were important to young people's aspirations. However, the paper makes no reference to the differing priorities that institutional and stakeholder groups may hold that contribute to hierarchical and evolving power dynamics in relation to aspiration formation. Instead, the researchers cite limited knowledge, a general lack and/or reluctance to pursue opportunities; "a lack of role models"; and "lack of advice and information about career options, especially for younger teenagers" (pg.39-40) as contributing factors in the formation of young people's aspirations in socio-economically deprived areas. Building on work by Gottfredson (2002), the paper does suggest that 11-14 is an important age in aspiration formation. Around this time, young people begin to differentiate between "idealistic from realistic aspirations" (Cabinet Office, 2008:34). The Cabinet Office report propose programmes, multi-agency personnel, economic and social resources to address community- and neighbourhood-based vacuums of systemically low aspirations and attainment, although they find limited evidence in the literature for these assertions around low aspirations.

Since 2008, emphasis has moved away from social transformation and community level engagement as expressed in documents such as those above. This has been replaced by a move at the turn of the decade, to a greater focus on the regulation and evaluation of the activities that promote "institutional recruitment" (Harrison & Waller, 2018:914). Examples of this shift can be seen in various government outputs. For example, "Girls career aspirations" were the subject of a 2011 Ofsted Report (OFSTED, 2011), assessing the efficacy of education provisions on raising aspirations for girls in England. That was later followed by a Department for Education (DfE, 2014) report which conducted an evaluation of "School and College-level Strategies to Raise Aspirations of High-achieving Disadvantaged Pupils to Pursue Higher Education". This DfE (2014) report found that school and college leadership felt strongly that it was crucial for young people to consider all opportunities post-compulsory education. However, this finding was incongruent with the result in the same report, that many 11-18

schools (70%) and colleges (73%), placed the promotion of HE, as one of their provisions' top priorities.

Archer, DeWitt & Wong (2014) were particularly critical of existing careers education policies as well as their implementation. They argue that whilst aspiration is painted in policy as "a tool for social mobility and change" (pg.77), it contributes to the perpetuation of social privilege and disadvantage. They urge schools and careers services to continue to challenge rather than duplicate "inequalities in aspirations". Nevertheless, a more recent blog post by Ofsted (2018) entitled "Building confidence, encouraging aspiration" suggests that policy rhetoric implying a poverty of aspiration persists. In the blog, Ofsted emphasise their continued commitment to ensuring provisions are made for young people to discuss "their career aspirations and how they can achieve them and how they're progressing towards this." The governmental regulation of "aspiration-raising" tasks produces a contractual responsibility on institutions to produce "Good" strategies. However, whilst the DfE report (2014) and other governmental publications exude an air of objectivity, even the title of the report reiterates a deficit narrative. The power-wielding "School and College" are strategically-positioned to "Raise Aspirations" of the "Disadvantaged". The institutions are implicitly positioned as active and strategic, whilst the pupils are deemed "disadvantaged" and subservient. This assessment offers a small snapshot of the manner in which the deficit narrative of aspiration remains pervasive and persists unquestioned and unchallenged in public policy.

Across the education research landscape, contestations have grown to counteract implicitly-deficit, aspiration-raising discourses. "Aspiration" as proposed by Gorard et al (2012), and adopted by many contemporary UK researchers, is: 'what an individual hopes will happen in the future' (p. 13). Baker (2017) argues that "aspiration"; the hope or ambition of achieving (Lexico, 2019); with its renewed political and institutional significance, places too much emphasis on an individual's shortcomings, foregoing the socio-economic dynamics at play. Political and institutional definitions have co-opted and oversimplified aspiration to fuel current rhetoric which often falls foul and locates some individuals as intrinsically deficient. An example of this policy narrative is referred to in Lupton & Kintrea (2011) who explore the proposed implementation of community-based projects to raise aspiration: entitled 'Inspiring Communities' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009). They highlight that

the project denotes "the clear implication that not only do young people have lower aspirations in disadvantaged communities, but that low aspirations are shared by parents and other adults" (Lupton & Kintrea, 2011:322). These definitions are perpetuated by the same political and HE institutions which proclaim to offer continuous social critique to combat social injustice. Often, in fact, they remain guilty of upholding and maintaining the same forms of social disparity they seek to overturn.

Gale and Parker (2015) critique how, in the Australian context, aspiration has morphed from a private, individual consideration into "a legitimate policy domain for government intervention" (pg.83). This transformation was instigated and has been heavily influenced by the political motivations within the HE landscapes of other OECD countries, such as the UK. Arguably, aspiration, in the institutional sense, has become tangible and fuels policy that informs initiatives and practice. However, Gale and Parker also note that the popular view of responsibility for the formation of aspiration remains with the individual. "Thus, when students' aspirations for higher education fall short of government and institutional targets, the shortfall is attributed to non-participants themselves (and their typically disadvantaged backgrounds), who are judged to have little or no aspiration" (pg.83).

Definitions of HE aspiration, as a politically-significant term, continue to be shaped and re-shaped within the media. National headlines like "Ofsted chief says poor white communities lack aspiration and drive" (BBC, 2018), do much to suggest "three elements – being White, male, and working class – combine in an additive fashion to encourage lower aspiration" (Berrington et al, 2016:749). However, they do little to explain the role of aspiration in guiding future plans and outcomes. Notwithstanding that terms like working-class, lower socio-economic background and poor, quickly become subsumed as proxies for poverty and both poor and white become unequivocal prerequisites for low HE aspiration. A DfE-commissioned research report by McIntosh (2019) explores the Post-16 Aspirations and Outcomes of respondents to the Longitudinal Studies of Young People in England. They found particular groups were relatively more likely to want to participate in HE. Aspirations and intentions to apply to HE were relatively higher for women compared with men; those of ethnic minority backgrounds compared with white respondents; those living in London as opposed to elsewhere in the UK; and those with relatively higher academic attainment and those from more affluent

backgrounds. The McIntosh report suggests that despite institutional changes between the 2006 and 2015 GCSE cohort, such as the expansion of the apprenticeship programme and the increase in HE tuition fees in England, trends in aspirations to apply to HE have not seen significant change. Applying to university - post A-Levels - is still reported as the most popular post-16 aspiration, relative to vocational routes. That said, the report does highlight some evidence that priorities in aspirations for university are changing over time. Popularity is rising for applications and degree participation in STEM subjects, contrasted with a relative decrease in popularity for "arts based degrees" (McIntosh, 2019:79). The report also notes a strong sense of agency and pro-activism on the part of some young people, with regards to their university aspirations: "the results showed that those who attended university had gathered more information and discussed their future more, than those who did not attend" (ibid). However, three things remain unclear from the report by Mcintosh (2019) that are particularly relevant to this review's consideration of institutional notions of aspiration. Firstly, whether young people's agency is driving their search for information, vice versa, both or otherwise. Secondly, who the young people may have discussed their aspirations and future ideas with and finally, the role that these people and educational institutions may play in facilitating discussions and dialogues with young people about their HE aspirations and futures.

How widening participation stakeholders such as HE institutions and governmental bodies view the relationship between aspirations, young people's knowledge of their futures and the role of capital has been presented by other contemporaries. Examples such as Khattab (2015) and Harrison (2018) consider challenges to the deficit model of aspiration which begins to reposition young people and their assets at the centre of our understanding about their plans for the future, and how we can positively facilitate those.

Khattab's research interest lies in exploring the role of expectations in modulating educational aspirations and achievement. Referencing Reynolds and Pemberton (2001), Khattab (2015) argues that aspirations and expectations are fundamentally distinguishable and "empirically and cognitively different". This reflects an evolving discourse in widening participation research, which articulates an "important distinction between what selves a young person might desire and those they think likely" (Harrison & Waller, 2018:918). It implies that all individuals articulate a personal distinction between the two and that the two concepts are independent.

Like Khattab (2015:731), I question the politically-driven "causal relationship between aspirations and school achievement". Whilst this may be the case for some, through my research, I aimed to explore whether the internal and relational construction of these two factors for many individuals are mutually exclusive, through their constructions of the future.

Interestingly, Harrison (2018:7) presents a new conceptual model which views possible selves as "highly individualised, but constructed within a sociocultural context that shapes which selves appear possible, desirable or probable". At the heart of the notion is a partial overlap between like-to-be selves and like-to-avoid selves with one's probable selves. Harrison opens with a critique of aspiration-raising agendas, policies which situate the locus of responsibility for their future firmly with those "least-likely". The theory of "Possible Selves" challenges the deficit rhetoric and presents an approach to widening participation research, policy and practice that reconsiders our definition of aspiration to HE. It offers the opportunity to construct a number of potentially useful interventions to promote self-efficacy across the educational trajectory for the "potentially-recruitable", a term referenced in Fuller, Heath and Johnston (2011:8). For Harrison (2018), aspiration and "possible selves" are paralleled in young people's orientation to the future, but Harrison advocates for the adoption of possible selves over the former in empirical research for four reasons. Possible selves "embody an element of expectation"; require that they "are not simply envisaged"; evidence suggests they impact on "motivation for schoolwork and hence to educational decision-making" and "negative like-to-avoid selves are seen as having equal motivational force as aspirational like-to-be selves" (pg.9).

Insights have also been offered by colleagues like Campbell & McKendrick (2017), who challenge the "poverty of aspiration". They theorise and present a re-examination of Aspiration through the capability approach. Informed by Amartya Sen (1985, 2009), Gale & Parker (2018) also explore aspiration in terms of capabilities, where they are cynical of the international rise of HE expansion. They report that it has become crude "by-products of the human-capital raising agenda of governments" (p.32), and flourishes under a guise of equality promotion. Similar critique is also raised in my exploration of Birmingham as an educational context and the city's potential tussle with neo-liberal approaches to education. Gale and Parker (2018) critique two contentions underpinning contemporary WP research in England. These, in brief,

are that low SES equals low HE Aspiration, and HE Aspiration is the pinnacle of all Aspiration, only reserved for the most privileged few.

Bourdieu (1986) asserts that many individuals have an abundance of either one or more of the following, at their disposal: social capital – in brief, the accessibility to social networks; cultural capital, an individual's culture and education; alongside economic capital, put simply: their financial wealth .If Bourdieu is largely accurate in his assessment of the class system and its subsequent application to education, then capital, in any form, plays a significant role in modulating the plans for the future for all, including those "most-able, least-likely. However, whilst social, cultural and economic capital are important in considering future trajectories, young people are not cups that we can just fill up with capital. They are, in reality, dynamic social beings set amongst interdependent peer networks and institutional, social and school structures. My research aimed to explore the role of some of these social structures, networks and relational factors in modulating HE aspiration. If this research had merely explored the individual's perspective on HE aspiration in isolation, the impact of the social structures and networks on these young people's experiences, as Bourdieu envisioned, may have been overlooked. Social and cultural positioning are crucial to the way all individuals perceive their options, which in turn inform every one of their choices: aspiration, with a research focus on higher education, is no exception.

In addition, a particular focus on the role of expectations continues to infer an intrinsic deficit on the part of the individual. It also implies that widened participation will be produced through an overwhelmingly internal solution, widened expectations. In actual fact, participation in university, particularly highly selective institutions, is a zero-sum game in which capital is leveraged to the advantage of those most privileged (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital is not merely a commodity you can gain; it is acquired as a transaction in which someone gains and in turn the other loses. Those who are in positions of power, maintain their superiority not predominantly by having vast amounts of capital on which they draw , but in having the power, or capital, to consistently change the game. I agree with the authors, Webb et al (2017), in their assertion that in order to truly widen participation and cultivate an environment of belonging and mutual respect of contributory value, a space is needed to critically examine higher education as an institution – maybe an institutional reformation is needed.

Like Harrison's 2018 paper, my research is also critical of the pervasive deficit narrative. However, for my research, unlike in the theory of "possible selves" in the WP context, I was reluctant to unequivocally discard the term aspiration. It is a term which is familiar to many across the educational landscape, and holds institutional relevance and social reference. Instead, I intend to challenge the misappropriated definition which sees some positioned as lacking in aspiration. The theory of possible selves presents, amongst other things, a framework for implementing social interventions, as well as the promotion of social justice. Whilst implementation in situ may be important to the endeavours of social justice, there remains a gap within widening participation which critically integrates distinctions between social justice and social engineering. If not, research may be guilty of positioning the school exclusively as a factory for the work force of the future, rather than promoting the positive evolution of individuals in the present. That said, the theory of possible selves may have invaluable contributions to make to research into widening participation but like Harrison, I believe it represents "one possible piece in the much wider puzzle" (pg.15) and concur that "the field [of WP] needs a new vitality that reaches beyond the simplistic deficit model provided by aspiration-raising" (pg.16).

Throughout this section, I have explored examples of what constitutes aspiration in literature around governmental, HE and institutional WP policy and the role of governmental and HE institutional policy and practice. I argue that this literature contributes to a deficit narrative of aspiration of those living in lower socio-economic areas in government and institutional policy, despite little evidence suggesting that young people hold fundamentally low aspirations. Changes in institutional priorities have also contributed to a shift towards an increased inspection and regulation of aspiration as a political priority, for example in Ozga et al (2013) and Courtney (2016). This serves to socially engineer and narrow aspiration to HE and produces inconsistencies between the articulation and performance of educational aspiration across stakeholders such as schools, staff, young people and HE institutions. Whilst literary critics such as Smit (2012), Burke (2013), Baars (2014), Harrison (2018), have begun to denounce the deficit narrative within aspiration and widening participation research, there appears to be a gap in the WP literature which engages young people in research around aspiration, particularly to HE. My research begins to answer Baker's (2017) call discussed above, for

forthcoming research to account for the formation, motivations, academic or otherwise, and the moral significance of young people's aspiration; all of which, for Baker, are connected to young people's ideas around success and their value of education. I explored this notion within my this thesis by considering the young people's formation of HE aspiration. My contribution to knowledge aimed to reposition the critical lens towards the institution's articulation, observation and implicit theorising of HE aspiration. I proposed a move away from emphases on a cumulative interpretation of HE aspiration. Instead, I explored the propensity of an evolving exploration of HE aspiration, which reflects on the interactions of young people, their knowledge and how this is shaped by their teachers, peers and in WP activities within and outside of school.

2.3.3   Aspiration as a wider socially-constructed concept of the future self

Hart (2012) proposes that aspiration is always goal-oriented and related to ideas of the future self (pg.79). To consolidate this review's wider consideration of HE aspiration which includes wider social and temporal concepts, this section considers aspiration as knowledge young people draw upon which explore goal-driven notions of their future selves. This section begins by briefly reflecting on how young people's aspirations differ from political discourse around aspiration. Instead, the review presents evidence to support notions that young people think about aspiration in a holistic manner, shaped by factors including attainment, prior aspirations and evolving self-concept. It then moves to rebut notions of any internalised low aspirations within lower socio-economic groups and communities. It discusses research suggesting that aspiration has rarely been problematised and that researchers' methodological approaches to studying aspiration with young people may be further limiting their understanding of the concept. The review presents aspirations beyond educational and vocational plans. It considers some social and cultural challenges associated with realising aspirations. These include the need to internalise personal ownership of their aspirations and navigate contrasting class identities.

Hoskins & Barker (2017) found that young people's future aspirations showed little resemblance to the articulation and social expectations of aspiration in policy discourse. The study suggests that young people construct aspiration in a more expansive manner than

currently accounted for in government policy. Roberts, Atherton & Remedios (2011), like other contemporaries, also find that the pupils' knowledge of their future challenges anecdotal and political discourse. They consider young people's "forward thinking" (pg.8) in relation to their view of the future. Many of the young people had plans to go to university and saw their potential job as important to their knowledge of the future. The researchers challenge views that "intergenerational transmission" (pg.1) leads to low aspiration in young people from families in lower socio-economic groups. They propose an alternative frame by which Year 7 pupils' views of the future are shifted by their secondary educational attainment. Mazenod et al (2019) find that self-confidence is more indicative of HE aspiration than even pre-existing aspirations and attainment, with levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy having been previously linked to aspiration (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Lupton and Kintrea, 2011). These findings suggest that debates continue in the literature about the importance of attainment and aspects of self-concept in shaping aspiration and young people's knowledge of the future.

However, the idea that low aspiration is internalised within individuals and communities is strongly rejected by many researchers. Limited theoretical critique has been targeted at undercutting any deficit notions of aspiration and ideas that some have any poverty of aspirations. Trailblazers like Burke (2009) and Harrison & Waller (2018) highlight how patronising WP discourse remains by, amongst other things, continuing to imply that some are lacking aspiration. They challenge the notion that if only one aspired higher, that their hard work would, and aspiration should, be enough to enter university, particularly selective HE institutions. This assumes, of course, that these institutions represent the archetype of which all should aspire. Rather, it is most probable that true deficiency lies in any narrow, operationalised construction of aspiration and not in the individuals themselves, as much of English rhetoric around WP would imply. For example, Lupton and Kintrea (2011) examine findings on the nature of aspiration within "disadvantaged" neighbourhoods. They outline that there are no universal aspirations amongst all within these areas; the regions vary based on location, economic structure and other factors. They also note that aspiration has rarely been problematised. They conclude that the evidence to support or refute the role of socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in fettering attainment, aspiration, or the mechanisms by which this may occur, remains inconclusive.

In asking young people to explore their wants, desires and expectations in tandem, St Clair and Benjamin (2011) also foreground notions that the study of aspiration is rarely problematised. They suggest that in researching aspiration, researchers should take into consideration five key challenges around their research endeavours. These include firstly, the validity of the aspirations expressed; they ask "could the results have been different if peer interviews or other bottom-up methods had been used?" (pg.513). They question whether the type of data collection methods used to explore aspiration are further restricting our understanding of young people's HE aspirations. Secondly, they highlight the influence of and engagement with policy on young people's aspirations; the engagement and influence of policy is bidirectional. Young people do not exist in silos outside of political and media discussions, so it is important to account for their knowledge around these. Next, St Clair and Benjamin (2011) consider the resources available to young people, including the relevance that they hold, and the importance of these to the formation of aspiration. They note, for example, that "the school drama club could be an essential support for their aspiration to work in the theatre, while it is completely irrelevant to another" (pg.514). The importance that young people place on a particular resource, is arguably what elevates it from a provision, to a resource. In addition, the fourth key feature presented is the role of feedback and interaction around aspiration. The peer and wider social interactions that offer feedback on aspirations of young people according to St Clair and Benjamin (2011), provide insights into the development of aspiration. Finally, the researchers suggest the possibility of being alienated shapes young people's aspiration. In response to their findings, they advocate for recognition of a more performative model of aspiration where "people are doing the best they can with what is available to them" (pg.515). Overall, they found no poverty of aspirations; "rather than being a barrier, their current aspirations are higher than the UK labour market can fulfil" (pg.513).

Law, Finney and Swann (2014) also strongly rebut a "poverty of aspiration" discourse amongst young people and contradict notions that particular young people are universally disengaged in fulfilling their aspiration. They found that young, black boys in Northern England drew on social capital and networks to reinforce their aspiration and enable many to flourish and articulate aspiration that was largely similar to other ethnic groups. They found they even used creative strategies to bolster future outcomes. Archer, DeWitt & Wong (2014:59) find that the

young people generally report "high" aspirations and that, again, there is little evidence of a "poverty of aspiration" from their sample. However, they do urge caution as there were more pupils who reported higher cultural capital in the sample than those who reported lower cultural capital. In general "a good quality of working life" was important to the young people reporting higher cultural capital (pg.67). Many expressed a more holistic concept of future aspiration, including altruism and wanting "to make a difference in the world" (ibid.), with 77.9% of Year 8 pupils agreeing with this being at least somewhat important to them. The researchers find that for the young people, "...aspirations were not solely focused on achieving personal fame, status or wealth" (Archer et al, 2014:67). More than 95% of pupils wanted time with their families in the future; with more than 90% holding aspirations to help others, please their families, and have a job that allowed them to pursue other hobbies and interests.

Overall, this research suggests that young people from particular backgrounds do not display universally low aspirations and that young people's aspirations and plans for the future extend beyond education and career trajectories. Some writers have also considered how aspirations link to culturally, temporally and socially embedded knowledge of the future self.

Appadurai (2004:68) argues that "aspirations for the good life" are fundamentally culturally embedded and are often diffused by individuals into local ideas about lifestyle. These ideas are then re-articulated as certain wants and choices. Particularly critical of this latter step, Appadurai suggests that these processes create an environment in which choices are "decontextualised" (pg.68), and the role of culture, be that institutional, individual or otherwise, in social engineering is often swiftly erased from empirical research.

Bourdieu also offers literary consideration to the future and aspirations. He emphasised that the importance of the future to our construction of the present was "generated by the habitus and... governed by the past conditions of production" (Bourdieu (1990b:62) – somewhat in a recurring loop. Reay (2004) defines habitus as an "internal matrix of dispositions" (Archer et al, 2014:59). For Bourdieu (1990b: 64), power is a key component to understanding how this loop works as "the power relations of the present project themselves into the future, from where they govern present dispositions, especially those towards the future". Bourdieu goes on to state that people adjust their aspirations based on what they discern is attainable and for them.

In so doing, they "become the accomplices of the processes that tend to make the probable a reality" (Bourdieu, 1990b, 64–5). Elster (2007:245) even goes as far as to say that the idea "…that people adjust their aspirations to their circumstances, so that they maintain a more or less constant level of satisfaction, the hedonic treadmill, is a pretty well-established psychological finding". The future that Bourdieu spoke of had multiple facets, with aspirations for the future encompassing one's own wants and desires, those for others, as well as those for one's wider world (Uprichard, 2011).

Gale and Parker (2018) find that, as well as desires for financial wealth and stability, examples of what is considered fitting "for the likes of us", interact with aspiration (Bourdieu et al., 1990:56). The notion of learning one's place (e.g. Gulson & Symes, 2007; Janke et al, 2017, Reay, 2018) and subsequently feeling different, or being othered (e.g. Johnson et al 2004; Lahman, 2008; Dervin, 2016), echoes findings from a milieu of research wherein individuals become marked out as different, both within and between social groups.

For some, middle-class aspiration is even held as superior to any working-class culture (Lehmann, 2016); "to remain working class, materially or culturally, is to have failed" (Boliver, 2017:425). As a result of their aspiration - or a desire for more - many individuals report straddling at least two conflicting states of being, that for Butler, is beyond articulation (Butler, 2012:216). They find themselves held in opposition; between the social world in which they have existed in up to now… and the aspiration for any breakthrough into new frontiers.

Although based in the Australian context, Prodonovich, Perry & Taggart (2014) offer some conceptual insights to researching aspiration in the English context. They acknowledge, in light of their own work, work by Appadurai and others, that all aspire. However, moving beyond conceptualising young people's aspiration, they also advocate for a forum by which a multitude of education stakeholders can collaborate to "build profound relationships and [explore] task centred activities" (pg.185) relating to aspiration. The researchers argue that the capacity to aspire is what remains stunted. They suggest that stakeholders, including young people, need a space "to express their aspirations and desires in a forum where the next step towards them can be seen, explained, practiced, supported and achieved" (ibid). According to these researchers, provision should be made to engage a variety of stakeholders including "schools,

families and communities" (pg.182) as well as "teachers, peers, family and social groups" (pg.185) as well as young people themselves. They argue that without this wider integrated engagement, individuals will be unable to support their aspirations with insights into HE-affiliated personnel, activities and information.

2.3.4   Defining young people's HE aspiration

Overall, the literature review of HE aspiration presents three dominant approaches to research on the topic. Firstly, HE aspiration as a concept oriented to future careers and education. Secondly, as a concept in institutional rhetoric, exploring how WP discourse in research and policy upholds as well as challenges deficit narratives of aspiration. Thirdly as a type of research on aspects of young people's aspirations beyond their educational and vocational plans.

Synthesising these three aspects of young people's Higher Education aspiration, I define HE aspirations as: *goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012), young people's knowledge of HE, interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities, including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014), levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All of these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education. It is an evolving process of (re-)articulation, shaped by a zero-sum game in which young people are guided to perform a play without a script, as argued in literature by Bok (2010) and Bourdieu (1990).*

This definition forms part of the conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed by young people in schools. This conceptual framework is illustrated in the following section.

2.4   Conceptual framework of the formation of "most-able, least-likely" young people's HE aspiration

Whilst a plethora of research has been considered around HE aspiration, my review found gaps in our understanding, particularly in the role of young people's discussions in shaping the

concept. Reflecting on the three-part literature review around young people's HE aspiration, within the literature, the concept of HE aspiration was also rarely problematised. This section draws on the definition of HE aspiration offered above and the literature review, to present a conceptual framework of how "most-able, least-likely" young people form their HE aspiration using school interactions.

2.4.1 The purpose of the conceptual framework

Drawing on work by Levering (2002) and Jabareen (2009), this conceptual framework was developed and used to offer understanding of the phenomenon in the research question through "soft interpretation of intentions" (Levering, 2002:38). Using a conceptual framework, not as a predictive model but in an exploratory approach, is underpinned by the concept of freedom (Jabareen, 2009:51), rather than determinism. Using this approach, I was able to initially consider what may encompass the formation of young people's HE aspiration, whilst remaining flexible to the evolving nature of young people's HE aspiration that the researcher may encounter in the research field. The conceptual framework enabled me to pinpoint the mechanisms that may impact young people's formation of HE aspiration in school interactions and how these contribute to young people's knowledge of HE aspiration. It explored how young people share their knowledge of HE aspiration by foregrounding their interactions around HE aspiration in school, against the iterative background of classmate and school interactions and priorities. The conceptual framework helped me consider the nature of interactions that may occur and how these shape and form young people's HE aspiration.

The purpose of the conceptual framework was to establish the foundation of the research, indicate the research design and present a basis to consider the findings and implications of the research (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). It indicated how the research provided a contribution to knowledge and positioned and acknowledged the place of the research in light of theories and other literary content (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). The following section outlines the conceptual framework and what each aspect of the conceptual framework includes.

2.4.2 Outlining the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is used "not [as] a causal/analytical setting but, rather, an interpretative approach to social reality" (Jabareen, 2009:51). To illustrate the framework, a visualisation was developed, (shown in Figure 3), which broadly considers how young people interact with their classmates and their school, be that staff, its values, its organisational structure or other features, to form HE aspiration. Figure 3 briefly illustrates how young people's HE aspiration may be formed within their school context. It signals the external and internal factors that shape the concept of HE aspiration. There are further figures in Appendix 5 which present greater detail on what each aspect of the conceptual framework encompasses.

Figure 3 – Conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed by young people
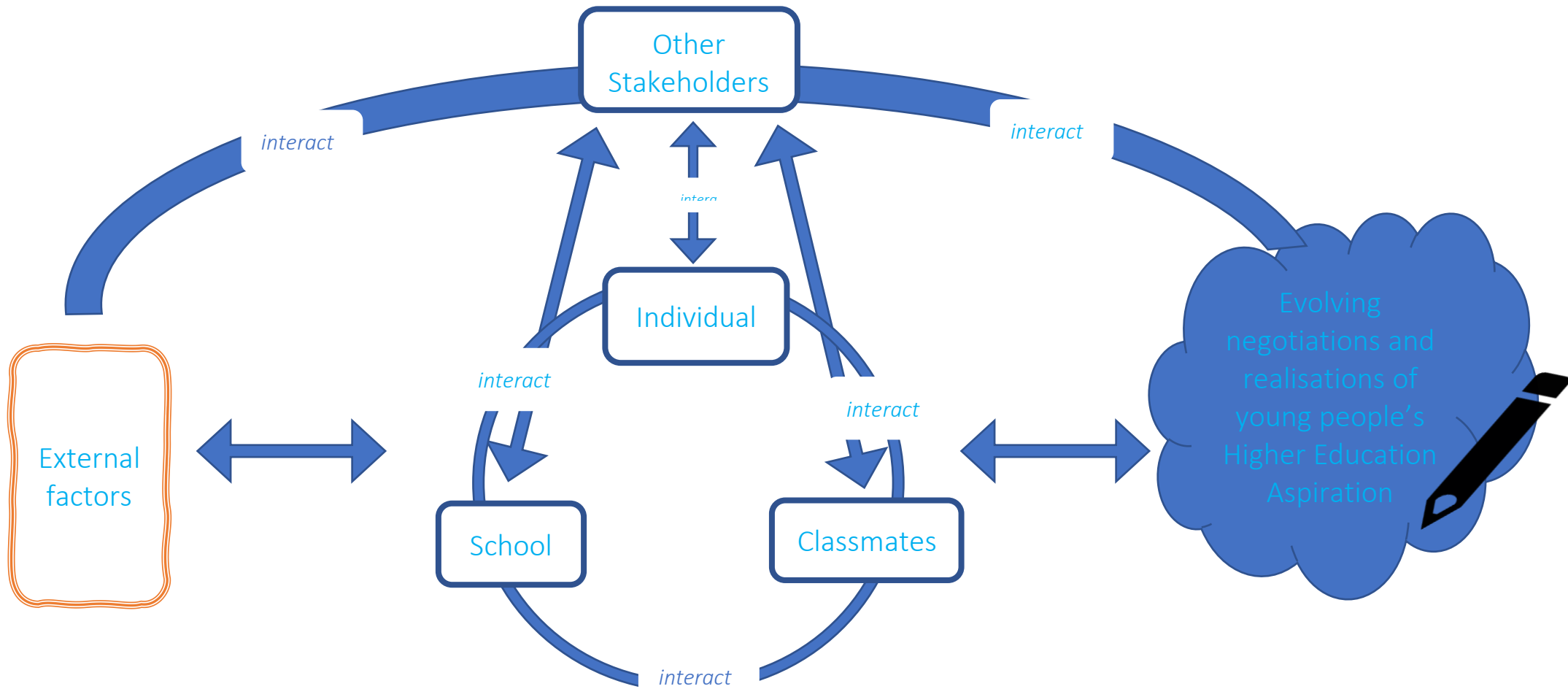
2.4.3 Exploring the conceptual framework

Overall, Figure 3 suggests that HE aspiration is an evolving concept that is situated as external to the young people. This is because from the literature, HE aspiration, arguably, transcends an internal process of individualised agency and goals for the future to also include interactions and wider institutionalised stakeholder priorities. Figure 3 proposes that considerations be given to how HE aspiration is formed in interaction with others, and how individual young people are embedded within the formation of HE aspiration. It suggests that individuals interact with their school, for example with school staff or school values, , in forming their HE aspirations. The individuals also interact with their classmates in their formation of HE aspiration. These interactions occur in a cyclical and reciprocal manner, in relation to HE aspiration, with individuals, the school, and the classmates, constantly adjusting their knowledge of HE aspiration in response to their interactions.

All three – the individual, the school and the classmates – also interact with other stakeholders in forming HE aspirations and vice versa. These simultaneous and evolving interactions, although not necessarily synchronous nor equal, contribute to the formation of HE aspiration. This relationship is also reciprocated between HE aspiration and all the stakeholders – outlined in blue - with them adjusting to the evolving formation of HE aspiration. External factors are derived both from outside the School triad, and from within it. Other stakeholders sit outside of this triad and sometimes bypass interactions with it to construct HE aspiration, which in turn shapes HE aspiration for the triad. Where Figure 3 refers to interactions, it encompasses the verbal, visual engagement and wider communication that the stakeholders share, such as spoken conversations, but also written communication, pictures and wider media outputs. This conceptual framework was used to indicate to the researcher, which aspects may be related to HE aspiration, for these young people, during the data collection. However, it was flexible to account for the additional and nuanced aspects of HE aspiration and its formation by the young people, through the process of the research.

As part of a critical reflection on the power dynamics related to the formation of young people's HE aspiration, the intention of the framework was to reposition young people as active agents within their knowledge and formation of HE aspiration. It acknowledged that institutions, including schools, wield power and influence over the Individual in relation to HE

aspiration. These occur both directly through interactions and/or indirectly through external factors, impacting the formation of HE aspiration. This is demonstrated in Figure 3 by visualising a direct link between Institutions and HE aspiration which bypasses the other stakeholders presented.

The conceptual framework was not fixed. It served as a guide to develop and broaden understandings of how young people's HE aspiration was formed in school. The aim of the conceptual framework was to propose aspects of HE aspiration, through the definition presented, and possible factors by which it was shaped. By exploring this process in school, the conceptual framework would be developed from findings of the research. The conceptual framing aimed to challenge the positioning of the School and these other Institutions in the field of WP as superior to the individual in HE aspiration formation, by positioning the individual as equitable and influential with the other stakeholders of HE aspiration. This is demonstrated in Figure 3 by presenting arrows that are bi-directional to indicate that interactions occur between stakeholders. By exploring HE aspiration, with these young people, this conceptual framework aimed to reposition their voice as valued, heard and embedded within the construction of the wider concept. Whilst much of the research around HE aspiration, implies that young people– defined in this thesis, as individuals and their classmates – are deficient, this conceptualisation argues that young people construct and shape the wider concept of HE aspiration, beyond the individualised educational goals for the future. The conceptual framework presented a guide to determine the main research question of:

How is Higher Education aspiration formed by "most-able, least-likely" young people in their school interactions?

…and as a basis to answer the research sub-questions:

1. What is Higher Education aspiration for "most-able, least-likely" young people in this school?

2. How do these young people discuss and interact about their HE aspirations, with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and within their school?

3. How do these classmates and their school play a role in the young people's formations of HE aspirations?

The conceptual framework is revisited throughout the thesis to discuss my research questions, justify my methodology and inform my analysis of how the "most-able, least-likely" young people of Amberley Grove school formed their HE aspirations. In the findings and discussion chapters, I explore the extent to which my conceptual framework accounts for the young people's formation of HE aspiration. In the findings and discussions chapters, I draw on the conceptual framework to outline how the findings coincide with aspects of and expand the definition of HE aspiration. I also use the conceptual framework to develop our understanding of how young people's HE aspiration is formed. In answering the research questions, I focused on the extent to which the young people's discussions with classmates and within school, played a role in their formations and what features encompassed the wider evolving negotiations and realisations of young people's Higher Education aspiration.

2.5   Summary

This literature review explored how debates around high academic attainment, class/socio-economic status and race/ethnicity positions many young people in WP research, policy and practice "most-able, least-likely". It then moves to discuss how HE aspiration is presented in the literature and uses this literature to construct a definition of the concept. This definition forms the basis of understanding how HE aspiration may be formed by young people in school. It is used in the conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed. The conceptual framework is visualised in Figure 3 and is used to outline the mechanisms by which young people may form their HE aspiration in school in this ethnographic case study. As an ethnographic case study, outlining and reflecting on the research context is important to understand the school setting in which HE aspiration is formed for these young people.

3   The Context of the Study

Exploring context is important for the construction of this ethnographic case study. Yin & Davis (2007) outline that conducting a case study requires the detailed consideration of a phenomenon in its "real world context" (Yin, 2014:16). This chapter presents some key characteristics of the school context of Amberley Grove, and its setting in the ever-evolving educational context of Birmingham in the West Midlands of England. Firstly, in section 3.1, I consider the context of educational provision in Birmingham as the geographical location of Amberley Grove School. Next, I explore how the ethnic diversity in 3.2, socio-economic demography in section 3.3 and HE participation trends of the city in 3.4 link to the positioning of the young people in Amberley Grove as "most-able, least-likely". Then in 3.5, I discuss how the context of Amberley Grove School is important to this ethnographic case study.

3.1   Educational provision

Amberley Grove is a unique site to explore how geographical location and place situates some as "least-likely". Being within the city of Birmingham in England, its location holds significance because the region has a complex pre-, post- and compulsory education system, reminiscent of various historical, as well as more recent, points in the UK's complex educational policy. As the most populous metropolitan borough council in the UK (ONS, 2020), Birmingham Local Authority oversees a variety of state-funded mainstream school types. The assortment has developed over multiple political agendas, with schools typified by one or more of the following categories. These include:

- Selective (grammar) and comprehensive schools
- Academies, free schools, voluntary-aided and local authority administrated schools
- Primary, secondary, All-through (3-19), 11-19 schools and sixth form colleges

In this city, the categories also straddle the state and independently-funded education sectors. Birmingham has a plethora of compulsory age educational provisions (Birmingham City Council, 2021). One such type is the state-selective school. These have been the focus of much critique about their role in educational segregation, effectiveness of the provision and the emotional turmoil they cause to young people and in their communities. As such, many have closed

and/or transformed into non-academically selective schools. However, Birmingham remains a partially selective system and research in the region continues to explore how these schools challenge and sustain social injustice. For example, Collins, Collins & Butt (2015) suggest that there is a "distance-decay effect" on attainment levels in a boy's selective school. Focusing principally on the boys' presumed socio-economic groups and ethnicities, the researchers conclude that those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and/or deprived areas of the region displayed poor performance relative to their counterparts. They attribute this somewhat, to these individuals living in what they call a "high vulnerability postcode". Collins et al (2015) criticise the school and suggest that it is reproducing social disparities rather than combatting them. The researchers propose possible initiatives, both from their research observations and external best practice, to counteract current patterns. However, they recognise that some situate responsibility for systematic discrepancies between school achievement of "marginalised" groups, should be taken by the school. From this research, many questions arise as to the socially just nature of Birmingham's compulsory education system. It further highlights that place, and to some extent home, in school and policy is often misattributed to the poor academic performance of young people. It also suggests that, at the very least, the academic performance of some "most-able" young people in the city is systematically related to whereabouts they live. This relationship between attainment and place is similar to the criticisms leveraged against the HE widening participation policy focus on "low participation neighbourhoods" (LPNs).

3.2 Ethnic diversity

At the time of writing, Around 46.9% of individuals in Birmingham identify with ethnicities other than White British, with 77.8% of the city born within the UK (BCC, 2013). Birmingham is the most populous metropolitan council in the UK and has been the site of some high-profile education scandals. Given the city's size, these scandals influence the regional and national education landscape. One such recent saga was the Trojan Horse affair. This was an educational scandal which started around 2014, in which 21 non-faith state-funded schools received snap OFSTED inspections. Some of these provisions had even been graded Outstanding - a grading which reduces the frequency of future inspections. These inspections were triggered following concerted pressure from Birmingham City Council, the media and

government agencies. Pressure is thought to have stemmed from an initial anonymised letter, which was received by the City Council. The letter accused "Islamists" of plotting to take over many schools in Birmingham (Awan, 2018) but it is now widely believed to have been a hoax. One school at the centre of this storm was Park View. Like the other schools, it has a large Muslim pupil population with particularly high socio-economic deprivation indicators (ibid). Prior to this scandal, Park View had combatted the odds and produced high academic results and Outstanding OFSTED inspections; heralded as a beacon of academic success by many government officials. This success was despite over 70% of its pupil population receiving free school meals.

However, by February 2014, accusations had swarmed that Park View's governing board sought to promote "an Islamic religious agenda" (Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018). In light of the Prevent Duty, counter terror policy and rising Islamophobia, this created a storm in the UK media and education policy. The result: the re-brokerage of multiple Birmingham academies; lengthy teaching suspensions and tribunals, which jeopardised teaching careers; as well as an extended veto on the lay-governance in Birmingham schools. These were just a few of the ramifications. Awan (2018:197) highlights that this affair left many Muslim communities within Birmingham feeling "unfairly categorised as extremists". This atmosphere "impacted upon their sense of identity and belonging". The number of Muslims living in Birmingham, far exceeded that of any other UK Local Authority, 234,411 at the last? census (BCC, 2013). Considering this climate in Birmingham, it is possible that Muslims may experience Islamophobia that shapes theirs and their children's engagement with their school. Furthermore, this scandal is just one example of how Birmingham as an educational context shapes the experiences of the young people who attend its schools. In the previous chapter, I discussed how the educational experiences of different ethnic minority groups often shape attainment and drive systemic patterns of HE application and participation. In the context of Birmingham, these interactions between factors such as attainment, race and ethnicity, also contribute to systematic disparities in HE participation rates, potentially resulting in some "least-likely".

Arthur (2015:311) argues that the Trojan Horse saga was borne out of a neo-liberal shift away from collective values for public education towards "individualistic and private values". Arthur

goes on to suggest that the scandal was one Birmingham response to the drive of "secular liberal education" to over-regulate the private lives of children and families. This over-regulation was suggested to be infiltrating education, under the guise of promoting different groups of people to flourish and pursue varying future trajectories. Against these evolving dynamics of neo-liberal educational ideologies for aspiration, the young people in Amberley Grove sit at this cusp of family life, school life and expectations for collective- and self-promotion. Amberley Grove, in the heart of Birmingham's ethnically diverse community, offers a unique insight into how these ideologies co-exist alongside similar and differing plans for their aspiration.

In a complex multi-ethnic region like Birmingham, researchers have also explored how difference is constructed within the city's educational landscape. Wilson (2014:105) explores how white British parents in a Birmingham school engage with cultural difference. For this researcher, cultural diversity is embodied in this school through "visual cultures". The pupils hail from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and the school celebrates various cultural festivals. It was also previously praised in its Ofsted inspection for "excelled in its commitment to developing community cohesion and fostering understanding and tolerance between families from different backgrounds"(ibid). The researcher acknowledges that had they explored the experience of non-white parents, their recounts may have been different. However, they found that the parents they spoke with felt disenfranchised by the school's engagement with multiple cultural observances. The researcher suggests that proximity was not enough to challenges systemic stereotypical and discriminatory views about the cultures of non-white groups. Nevertheless, following a concerted and prolonged effort of some parents to challenge cultural divisions, "existing knowledges and ways of living are called into question and gradually altered" (pg.102).

3.3 Demography

Alongside its complex backdrop of education provision and ethnic diversity, a lesser-known statistic shows that around 40% of Birmingham's neighbourhoods were amongst the most socio-economically deprived in England (The English Indices of Deprivation, 2015). This positions Birmingham as the sixth most proportionately-deprived local authority in England (ibid). As we have discussed, poverty and deprivation are pernicious. Academic attainment is

also found to be relatively low in the city. From the 2011 Census, the city ranked amongst the second lowest quintile for percentage of the population holding Level 4 qualification. Only between 21.0% and 23.9% of the Birmingham population holds a Level 4, or a pre-HE, qualification. In addition to this, Birmingham has one of the highest percentages of usual residents with no qualifications – between 28.0 and 40.5% (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

The city also has a relatively young population; at the last census, 22.8% of the city's population was under 16 (ibid). Current projections expect the new census to show a further rise in this proportion, as birth rates continue to rise from an increase of 20% between the 2001 and 2011 census. This young population of Birmingham is 3.3% higher than the West Midlands average and 3.9% higher than the English average. This report also shows that Birmingham has a "bulge" of residents in their early twenties, reflecting the large student population in the city. It is the only city in the UK to have more than one university established before the HE reforms of 1992. It is also one of very few regions in the country to boast multiple HE institutions founded after these reforms (Bathmaker et al, 2016b).

Place and space play a key role in shaping young people's aspiration in areas of socio-economic deprivation (Baars, 2014; Duckworth et al, 2016). However, they highlight that deprivation is not simply negatively correlated with aspiration and aspirations are not intrinsically "low" in areas of higher socio-economic deprivation. Such misconceptions have driven some to misattribute place as an exclusive indicator of those "least-likely" (Stahl & Baars, 2016). Challenges have been made to these anecdotal misconceptions that those living in socio-economic deprivation have low aspirations, including to Higher Education. Baars (2014) suggests that aspiration and place are constructed as multi-level, even in the "same deprived spatial context" (pg.6). Rates of socio-economic deprivation and attainment are linked to lower rates of HE participation; but the relationship is complex.

3.4   Considering HE Participation

Work continues to track trend of HE participation and features that impact it. Visualisations to display HE participation rates for young people in the UK were developed by the now obsolete, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and are now maintained by the Office

for Students. They also produce other datasets and statistics. The visualisations indicate the expected participation rates for young people within each parliamentary ward across the UK. These areas are referred to as "participation neighbourhoods". The data is labelled POLAR (Participation Of Local AReas). POLAR Maps have been used to indicate and highlight areas of the UK where young people are comparatively more and less likely to participate in HE, and account for expected rates based on factors such as attainment and ethnicity. These maps were quickly utilised by HE stakeholders around the country as a means to target particular initiatives in LPNs and widen participation to Higher Education. However, Harrison and McCaig (2015) argue that there has been an increasing and detrimental over-reliance on data produced by POLAR maps to combat social injustice in HE. This focus on LPNs has been criticised for promoting a quiet, but somewhat misplaced, confidence in the success of area-targeted initiatives. This is because exclusively focusing on LPNs overlooks "disadvantaged families living outside them" (Harrison & McCaig, 2015:793). In my research, POLAR maps are used to illuminate recent HE participation trends within the geographical area of Amberley Grove.

The POLAR maps use cohort data to rank and plot expected HE institution young participation rates against observed young participation rates within UK parliamentary wards. Figure 4 and 5 display the recent trends in HE participation rates within the Birmingham area, focusing around Amberley Grove. The maps outline each parliamentary ward and are colour-coded based on a quintile ranking of HE participation. Blue represents the highest quintile for expected participation rate, followed by turquoise, quintile two, yellow, quintile three, orange, quintile four and finally red which represents the lowest rate of expected HE participation in quintile five. Figure 4 represents the young HE participation gap between the expected and observed rates across wards, accounting for attainment levels, based upon data from POLAR3. For much of Birmingham and the surrounding areas, Figure 4 shows that HE participation is amongst some of the highest rates relative to attainment. This is because multiple Birmingham areas are shaded blue representing gaps in the lowest quintile for HE participation, when accounting for attainment alone. Surveying Figure 5, stakeholders may be reassured that participation to HE is higher than expected within the Birmingham area.

Figure 4 - displays the West Midlands regional quintile rankings of gaps in young participation in Higher Education accounting for attainment
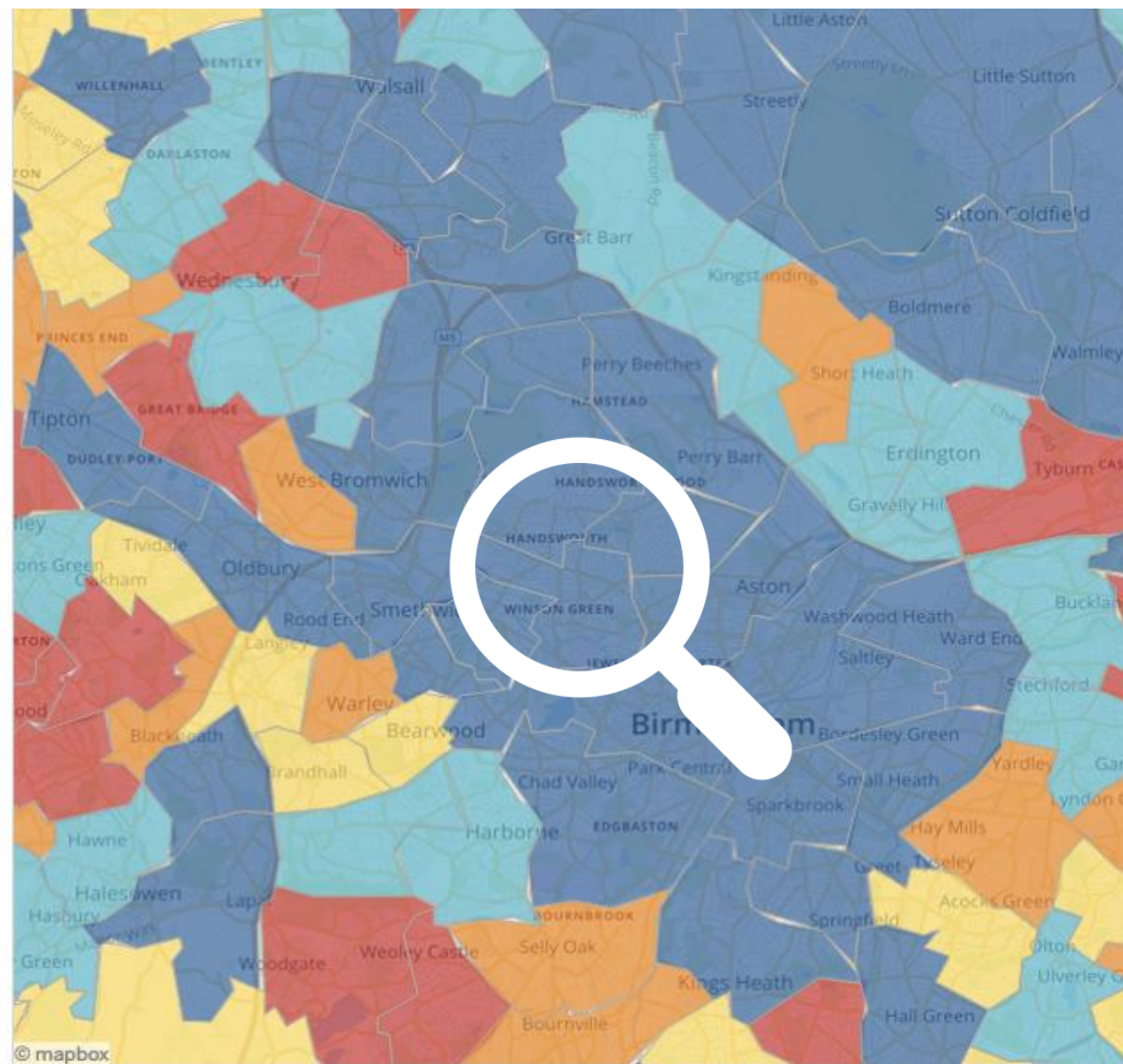
– Adapted from the HEFCE Interactive Polar Maps (POLAR3) now managed by the Office for Students

Figure 5 - displays the West Midlands regional quintile rankings of gaps in young participation in Higher Education accounting for attainment and ethnicity
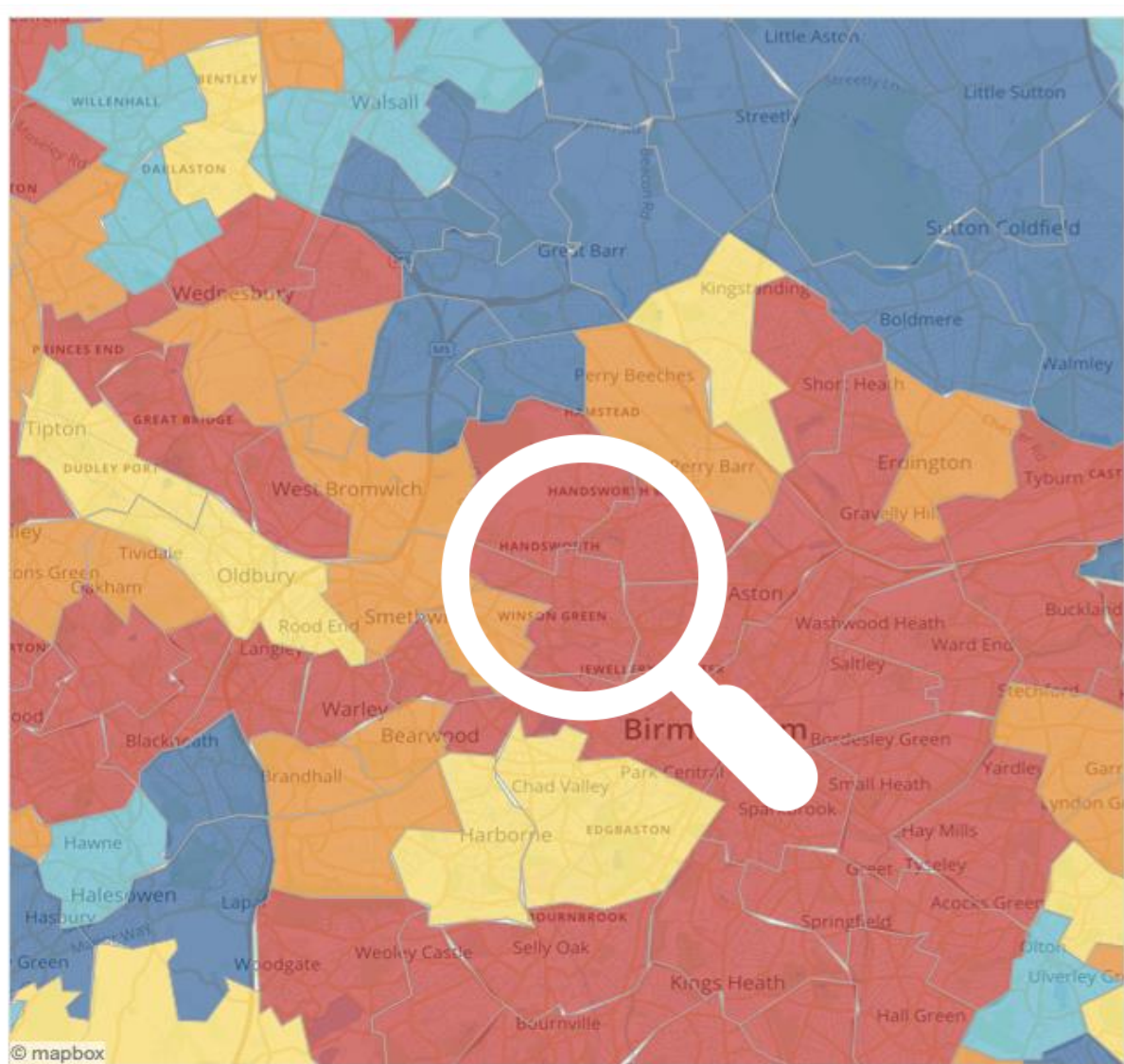
– Adapted from the HEFCE Interactive Polar Maps (POLAR3) now managed by the Office for Students

However, Figure 5 which accounts for the ethnic demographic for the region and the expected proportions of HE participants based additionally on this measure when exploring gaps in HE participation, displays a somewhat opposite picture. Birmingham remains an ethnically diverse metropolitan area and we know that many minority ethnic groups, on average, are statistically more likely to participate in HE compared with their White-British ethnic majority counterparts (see Figure 1 on page 52).

By accounting for increased expected rates of HE participation driven by the observation that the UK's minority ethnic population are numerically over-represented in young HE undergraduate enrolment, Figure 5 visualises the gaps between expected and observed HE participation, in light of Birmingham's multi-ethnic population. Once we account for the increased likelihood of participation driven the ethnic makeup of the city, the HE participation landscape of Birmingham changes from blue to red. In Map 2?, we observe some of the largest gaps between expected and observed HE participation rates in the country for young people. Much of the wards in and around the Birmingham city boundaries switch from the highest quintile in HE participation rates in Figure 4 based on attainment, to the lowest quintile when accounting for attainment and ethnicity. This contrast in participation rates is stark and suggests that the young people within Birmingham are just not participating in HE at the rate that we would expect. Questions remain over what is confounding the regional shortfall between expected HE participation figures and reduced uptake in participation when accounting for attainment and ethnicity amongst large swathes of the region, relative to equally-qualified young counterparts in other areas of the city and country. This discrepancy is particularly marked given Birmingham's diverse and well-established history and provision of higher education.

3.5   Why Amberley Grove

Birmingham is a geographical location with a large multi-ethnic population, a growing young population and a complex pre-, post- and compulsory education system. Amberley Grove sits at the heart of this dynamic, presenting an interesting backdrop to explore how HE aspiration is constructed in an area which has trends of unexpectedly low participation rates to HE. The high levels of socio-economic deprivation and poverty within the region discussed above, go some way to indicating the ongoing discrepancies in HE participation, particularly to selective

institutions. However, the relationship between participation rates and the location is complex and requires much more in depth exploration. One thing that the POLAR maps illuminate is that the context of Birmingham has a unique relationship with HE progression; a setting that sees more young people from all ethnic backgrounds, than would be expected, participate in trajectories other than HE upon completion of compulsory education. This is where my research comes in. It delved beyond trends in participation to explore how these young people within such a setting construct HE and their aspiration to it and how these constructions are shaped by their peer interactions. This region is a site of complex interactions between ethnicity, socio-economic deprivation, attainment and HE participation. Amberley Grove presents an instrumental case to consider how those at the intersections of socio-economic status, minority ethnicity and attainment, in a regional context where attainment is relatively low and poverty is disproportionately high form HE aspiration. Limited research has explored the propensity and likelihood of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds to participate in HE, or explored why they may follow other pathways. focusing this research on a school within a region where HE participation bucks the trend of increased HE participation rates for those from ethnic minority backgrounds, this research aims to address a gap in literature around the aspirations of "most-able, least-likely" young people.

3.6   Summary

This chapter explores the geographical and educational context of Amberley Grove. It considers how the complex educational market in Birmingham potentially skews the higher attaining pupil population of the city's comprehensive schools. It also details the multi-ethnic diversity and socio-economic demography of the city and how these factors often cause tensions around neo-liberal approaches to education, alongside ethnic and socio-economic divides within the city. All these combine to make Amberley Grove School an interesting context for an ethnographic case study into "most-able, least-likely" young people's formation of HE aspiration. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to explore how HE aspiration is formed in this context.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

"Ethnographers are culture detectives. We immerse ourselves in a field—a setting in which social interactions occur—living for a certain time and to the extent possible, in a specific social reality under study. We then share the experience of that social reality with others through our writing." (Gullion, 2016:3)

, This chapter presents and provides a rationale for, the methodological framework of the research.. In brief, the methodological framework is underpinned by social constructivism as its epistemology. It also utilises an ethnographic case study approach and the data collection methods encompass observations, interactive activities and group discussions. The ethical considerations are embedded across the methodological framework. Table 2 offers a summary of the framework:

Table 2 - Summary of the Methodological Framework
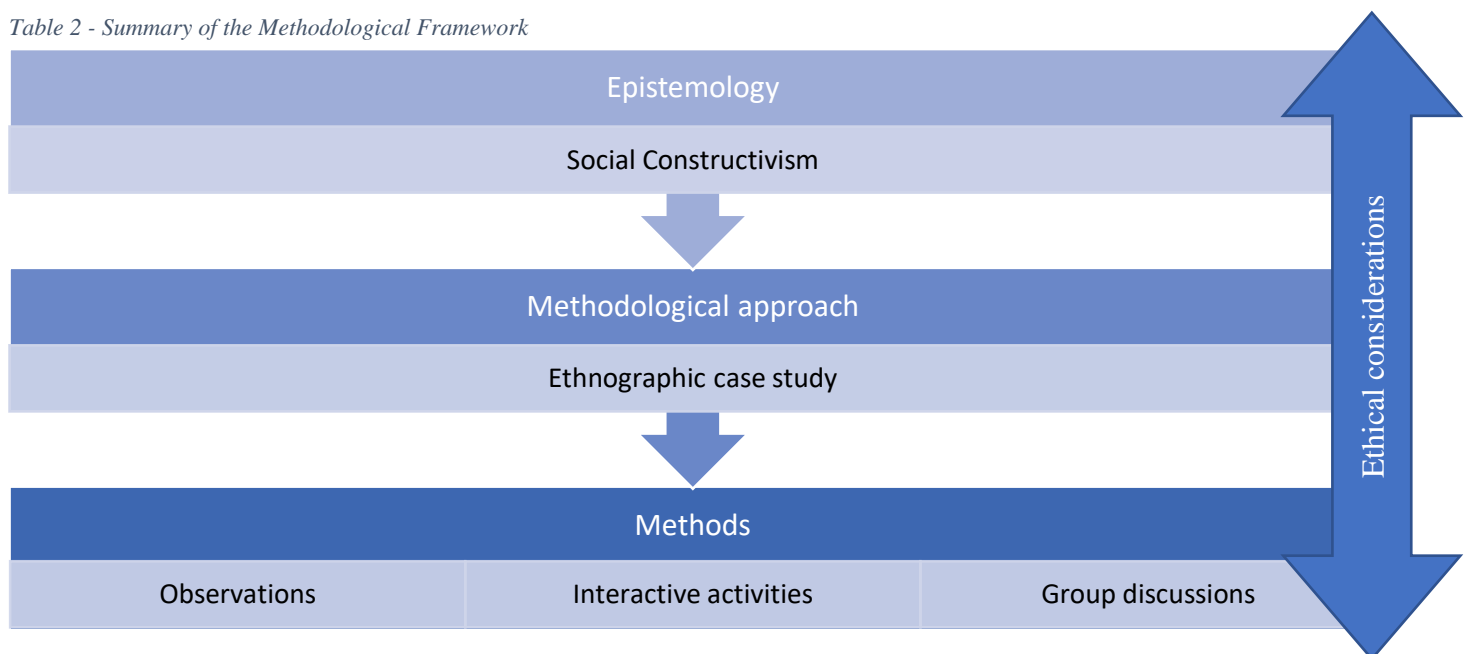
As Table 2 indicates, the chapter begins by exploring the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research through social constructivism. This forms the basis for considering the methodological approach to the research – the ethnographic case study. The epistemology and the methodological approach guided the data collection methods used to explore the research question of how young people's HE aspirations are formed. Next, I outline

the rationale for selecting both the case school, and the participants involved in the research. Then, the chapter details the data collection methods used within the research – participant observations, interactive activities and group discussions. It explores how and when these methods were implemented. Then, I outline the ethical considerations of the research, with the following section reflecting on my role as the researcher in the ethnographic case study, and how this evolved throughout my time in the field. Following this, the chapter considers the implications of researching with children and young people, followed by the importance of centralising young people's voices in this research, against a backdrop of low socio-economic status, minority ethnicity and educational power relations in schools. The final section outlines how the data was analysed and considers the measures taken to maximise the validity of the data.

4.2   Epistemology – Social constructivism

Every time social researchers position themselves within an epistemological premise, they largely trade structural importance for individual significance or vice versa. There are four main epistemological standpoints to social inquiry that are adopted either overtly or implicitly. These include, firstly, , realists who believe "that social scientists are warranted in believing that social entities exist" (Harp & Khalifa, 2016:22,2) and secondly, pragmatists who "interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences" (James, Burkhardt & Thayer, 1975:28). Thirdly, interpretivist thinking emphasises the distinction of social inquiry from the exploration of the natural world and that the former should focus on understanding or verstehen (Schwandt, 1994); and finally, positivism, research which ascribes to the scientific method of social enquiry (Hollis, 1994).

Social constructivism proposes that "learners construct their own knowledge from experience" and has evolved from the ontological and epistemological notions of post-positivism and relativism (Doolittle & Camp, 1999:5). These approaches whilst widely varied, are universally concerned with the individual experience, however subjective. They profess that the social world does not exclusively exist as a separate entity from the human, and cannot be observed as such; instead humans are essential to our understanding of the social world and actively construct it. I also believe that human experience is not independent of my perception of it

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(Berger & Luckmann, 1966); how I, as a researcher, construct and understand my reality, informs how I choose to construct my research. Importantly, however, in accepting that my opinions matter and impact how I formulate my research, I also adopt the position that the opinions of others matter in relation to my research question. Adopting a constructivist approach to HE aspiration, I propose that the young people are active contributors to knowledge of HE aspiration.

As an approach to education research, social constructivism "offers a view of learning and thinking that puts an active agent at its center" (Kritt, 2018:8). Therefore, I drew on principles of social constructivism, a critical pedagogy, to position the young people who participated in my research as value-adding, knowledgeable and important to the formation of HE aspiration and the research process more widely. A key objective for research from the social constructivist tradition is to understand phenomenon as it is experienced and shared by participants (Young, 2007:5). In so doing, the knowledge of the participant becomes important in the research process.

Building on work into social constructivism by other scholars (Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978 and Haste, 1987), Pollard (1990, 2001:5-7) theorises about the influences on young people's learning. He presents three broad domains that shape children and young people: the intra-individual, inter-personal and socio-historical. Firstly, the intra-individual domain is thought to encompass young people's skills, capabilities and "intellectual capacities" (Pollard, 2001:5). Next, social interactions and the meanings attributed to those are situated within the inter-personal domain. Finally, the socio-historical domain aims to account for "the wider context in which learning takes place, its origins and the [social, cultural, economic, and political] circumstances of the learner" (Pollard, 2001:6).

In light of the literature review, the conceptual framework of those "most-able, least-likely" and HE aspiration and scholarship on social constructivism, I considered that young people's HE aspiration may be formed within domains that encompass the intra-individual, inter-personal and socio-historical aspects. I propose that young people also learn about and are active contributors to their ever-evolving, complex own, as well as a wider, concept of HE aspiration. This aimed to acknowledge that there are complex inter-related facets that

contribute to the formation of young people's HE aspiration; exceedingly intricate for those of intersecting identities such as those from minority ethnic backgrounds and lower socio-economic statuses.

4.3   Methodological approach

The methodological approach utilised an ethnographic case study to understand how the "most-able, least-likely" young people's HE aspirations are formed in their school context, over approximately 10 months. It built on the epistemological position of the research discussed earlier - social constructivism; that the social world is constructed in interaction with others.

Reflecting the conceptual framework, the methodological approach focused on foregrounding how these young people form their HE aspirations, as well as how they (re-)articulate and share them, particularly in interactions with their classmates and/or within their school. It aimed to explore and challenge any dominant discourse around a taken-for-granted, direct path for young people through secondary, further and higher education. It also reflected on the power dimensions and implicit hierarchical positioning of educational institutions - as superior - and the young people - as inferior or deficit, broadly discussed in the literature review.

4.3.1   The ethnographic case study

This section outlines the key features of the ethnographic case study approach and explores why this approach was chosen to answer the central and sub research questions.

4.3.1.1 What is an ethnographic case study?

Case study research is multi-faceted and straddles epistemological and methodological orientations (Yin, 2018; Gillham, 2000; Stake, 1995; Elman, Gerring & Mahoney, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2012). In defining the case study, those drawing from quantitative traditions propose that case study represents an approach to data collection that differs from experiments and surveys in its focus on the real world context (Yin, 2018). Case study researchers with strong affinities with the qualitative approach to social research, pose additional ideas about the nature of case study research. Whilst Yin emphasises the indistinct boundaries around the unit of interest in case study, Merriam (1998) proposes that case studies hold distinct boundaries and that there are definite limits within which each "case" lies; the bounded case. They suggest that cases are unique, linked by similarities but free of universal laws governing structure (Stake, 1995:1). The definitions of each study should be illuminated by on-going observations of the peculiarities of each case of interest. Exploration of the specific, is key to case study research (Pollard, 2001). Furthermore, Stake (1995) draws on a variety of influences on the development of case study as an approach, such as ethnographic and holistic traditions to inform his understanding of case study research.

The ethnographic case study, in particular, is characterised by its focus on institutional culture; be that the institution as a whole, a particular group within it, its teaching practices or certain institutional behaviours (Merriam, 1998). Throughout it, the researcher aims to become increasingly immersed within their site of study (Bryman, 2008). Mandated by an ethnographic approach to case study, the addition of the temporal element allows for reflection of the researcher on the setting (Cohen et al, 2011). This aims to reduce the likelihood that the researcher will make far-reaching assertions; "Good case study is patient, reflective, willing to see another view" (Stake, 1995:12).

Stake (1995) proposes two overarching types of case study: the intrinsic and the instrumental. He recognises that to clearly assign any given case study to either domain may be difficult, but he advises in favour of aligning the case study with either of the two because the methods used to carry out either type of case study will differ. Stake views the main purpose of the intrinsic case study as being to explore peculiarities of interest to the researcher, whilst the

instrumental case study serves to illuminate our understanding beyond the nuances of the particular (ibid.). The political climate in which education research is situated, often creates a preoccupation with the pragmatic. Education policy-makers demand evidence – the naturalist, pragmatic or scientific kind. This often stands in opposition to the functional purpose of the intrinsic case study; it serves to document the interesting features of the singular case, somewhat reducing generalisability. Arguably, the instrumental case study helps to bridge the gap in case study research within education between researchers' affinities towards the case study and political stakeholders' expectations of easily applicable and disseminated findings.

4.3.1.2   How was the ethnographic case study approach used?

The ethnographic case study presented in this thesis considered how the individual, social, institutional and contextual factors shaped the evolving formation of these particular young people's HE aspirations in Amberley Grove. Drawing on the literature on using case study, I adopted an instrumental, ethnographic approach, focusing on a specific subset of young people within the school over time, how they constructed HE aspiration and the wider school culture that impacted on this formation.

My epistemological position aligned principally with the notion that individuals construct, interact with and interpret the social world. Using a flexible conceptual framework, this research explored the interactions of participants, through an ethnographic case study approach which held an intrinsically exploratory nature (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). The case boundaries were the HE aspirations of the Individual and the classmates, as outlined in the conceptual framework. As explored in the previous section, the individual and the classmates included "most-able, least-likely" young people aged 11-14 at Amberley Grove. The boundaries of the case study are highlighted in orange in figure 12 below.

Figure 6 - What is the case study
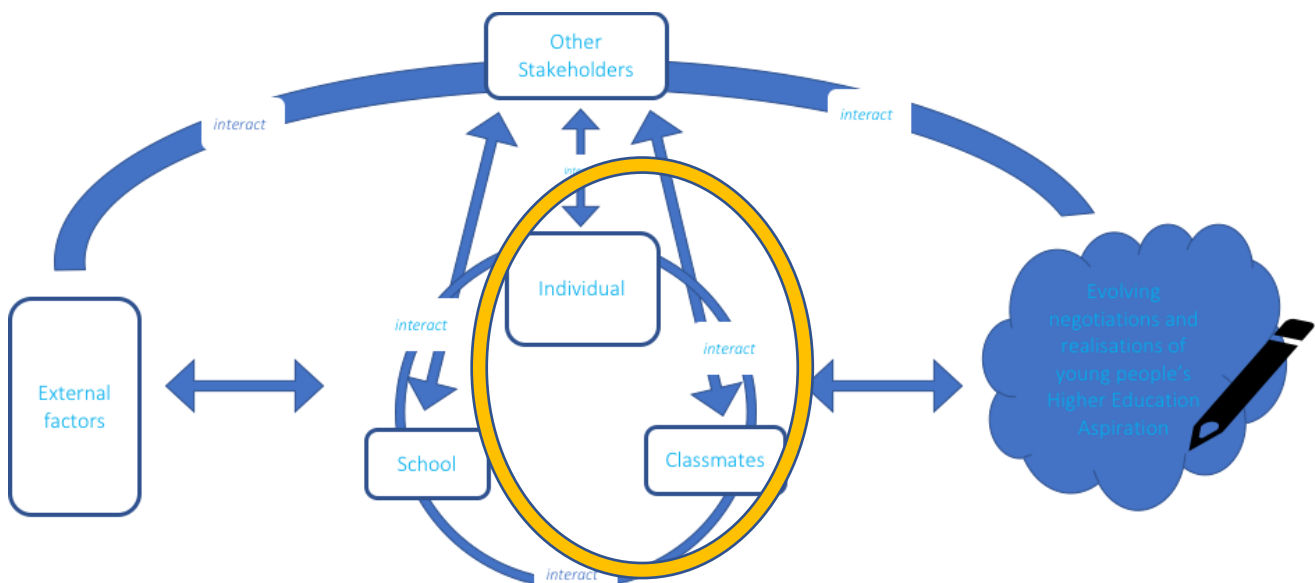
An advantage of case study research is that it straddles epistemological and methodological paradigms. This enables case study researchers to explore phenomenon that are complex and multi-faceted, using a variety of methods. This ethnographic case study utilised a variety of data collection methods to understand how HE aspiration is formed in school interactions. Young people interact in different ways throughout their school day. These include, for example, free-form conversations; facilitated discussions and peer group work; engaging in writing, drawing and school displays; in and outside of lessons and extra-curricular activities. By adopting an ethnographic case study approach, I was able to construct a variety of data collection methods that explored how these young people formed HE aspirations in multiple settings.

As this case study was embedded within the specific context of Amberley Grove School, I observed discussions by the young people within the school and also in the interactive activities and group discussions. The school as an aspect of the conceptual framework included its staff, its values, the building and its institutional priorities, amongst other aspects. This is outlined in greater detail in Appendix 5. Reflecting on the school context, the complexities of the young people's educational attainment, as well as class-based and minority ethnic identities in

Amberley Grove School and the multi-layered features of HE aspiration, contributed to a complex case study.

Overall, the methodological approach encompasses the conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed and an instrumental ethnographic case study. They were used within this research to understand how HE aspiration was formed by young people in school interactions using a variety of data collection methods. The following three sections outline firstly how the case and participants were selected, secondly the methods deployed within the research, and thirdly, the ethical considerations adopted.

4.4   Case and Participant Selection

Within the field of education research, case selection is largely influenced by availability of access. Elman et al (2016) caution against the use of opportunistic case selection where the researchers wish to make potential generalisations beyond the case in question, but reference "something akin to stratified random sampling" to counteract the initial bias imposed (pg.377). Amberley Grove was chosen as the research location of interest from a selection of schools managed by the Academy Trust which was part-funding my doctoral research. Contractual agreements were signed by the University, the Academy Trust and myself, as the researcher, to limit any potential conflicts of interest resulting from the research. The case study was crafted around some pupils attending Amberley Grove School who were in years 7, 8 and 9 (age 11-14) in September 2016. The study was conducted with these pupils from September 2016 until February 2018.

To select the participants, a list was requested of all the pupils in Years 7-9 who had received a "Level 5" or equivalent in either Maths or English statutory tests upon completion of their primary education. This formed the basis for the inclusion criteria as discussed earlier in section 2.2.1. From this list, a stratified sampling method was used to select 40 pupils from the school's Key Stage 3 "most-able" population. Following this, these pupils were invited to participate in the research; 27 pupils volunteered and consented to take part in the research. Eleven pupils declined to participate in further research from September 2017, whilst subsequently 16 pupils

participated across the duration of the research. All of the pupils who volunteered were selected to participate in the research.

The 16 participants were given pseudonyms throughout the research: Year 7 pupils -Rita, Rose, Jamie, Jada, Samuel, Eric and Year 8 pupils - Marianne, Kyle, Gabby, Sophia, Taylor, Dylan, Adam, Amanda, Mya, Jessica. Eleven pupils who consented to participate in the research during 2016/17, declined to participate in 2017/18, and all ceased participation at the same time. Of these, all six Year 9 pupils declined; one Year 8 pupil declined, whilst the remaining four who declined to participate were from Year 7. None of the participants (or their parents/carers) withdrew their consent to using their data in the research; they only declined to participate in future research.

Of the young people who participated in the research, all identified with ethnic backgrounds other than white British. This corresponds with the ethnic breakdown of the school population, where almost all of the pupils are non-white British (99%). Rather than choosing from a list of which ethnicity label they most closely identified with, the pupils were asked to self-report their own ethnic background. The opportunity for the young people to write their ethnicity was a way to recognise and centralise the knowledges of the young people. Their responses offer an indication of their ethnic background and cultural identity, but are not used as a generalisation. Their responses have not been listed here to limit the opportunity for the young people to be identified. Most of the young people (14 out of 16) specifically referenced being British or being a British citizen, although that labelling was also juxtaposed with other national, religious or ethnic identities; no-one was just British. None of the young people specifically identified themselves as belonging to the broad ethnic groups of Black, White, or Mixed, and only one pupil stated that they were also Asian. References were made to being Muslim, Sikh, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Christian, Scottish, Irish, Vietnamese, Jamaican, amongst other identities.

The research was focused on the formations of HE aspiration, but recognised the complexities of the diverse ethnicities of the pupils within the school. The conceptual framework acknowledges that cultural and ethnic identities impact the development of individuals' HE aspiration formation. However, this particular research was not focused on exploring the ethnic identities of the young people. Moreover, maintaining the anonymity of the young

people within the ethnographic case study was paramount within the research. Detailing ethnic identities within the research would have proved even more difficult for the maintenance of anonymity. As such, whilst I recognise that ethnic identities could have presented interesting insights into the HE aspiration formation of the young people in the study, they were outside the scope of this case study to explore in detail, and would have presented additional ethical issues for the thick description utilised within this ethnographic approach.

The main reason for choosing the age range of 11-14 is that research suggests it plays a crucial role in young people's life trajectories and development (Eccles, 1999, Chowdry et al, 2013). However, there were also other methodological considerations in relation to conducting research with this age range. Participants of this age are under-researched in relation to their views around HE aspiration compared with their later adolescent counterparts (Craft, Chappell & Twining, 2008). These "high" academic achievers all start secondary school at similar academic levels but mitigating factors produce a divergence in academic focus (McCoach & Siegle, 2003), which contributes to participation, or otherwise, in HE. In addition, access to these pupils proved much more convenient, as the English national curriculum format meant that they were not at crucial exam-periods within their educational journey. Furthermore, as "most-able" pupils, the negative impact on their academic progress of participating in extra-curricular activities, was considered by the school, as negligible. This may have been one of the factors that contributed to the ease of access to the young people during the school day. The limited number of research studies into this age of adolescence also sparked my interest into this crucial developmental stage, with the research available suggesting that the impact of active initiatives appears to be greater when they are implemented and sustained early (Moore, Sanders, & Higham, 2013).

4.5   Methods

Drawing on the methodological approach, this section outlines how the research questions link to the data collection methods and explores how the data collection methods were used to research how young people's HE aspiration is formed in school interactions. With respect to research tools, studies exploring HE aspirations tend to separate into two methodological camps; large-scale econometric studies or relatively small-scale qualitative studies. Both generally use conventional interviews and/or surveys to collect data. Knowledge of

individualised experiences gathered by these data collection methods illuminates research understanding of HE aspiration. However, less is documented about the day to day interactions that shape HE aspiration between these young people and the school stakeholders in the classroom and school spaces. Without critical examination, exclusively adopting traditional research tools to study HE aspirations, which are multi-faceted and evolving, can present issues.

To begin to account for the diverse interactions on young people's evolving construction of HE aspiration, this research deployed a variety of data collection methods – participant observations, interactive games and group discussions. These were held from September to December 2016 and then from September 2017 – February 2018. The interruption in data collection between January and August 2017, resulted from access issues related to change in senior leadership. Table 3 is a chart indicating the order of the research activities:

Table 3 - Schedule of Research Activities

Research Activities		2016/2017 Academic Year					2017/2018 Academic Year					
		Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17 --> Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17	Jan-18	Feb-18
Participant Observations		██	██	██	██		██	██	██	██	██	██
Interactive Activities	Past-present-future life map		██	██				██	██	██	██	██
	"Map these UK Universities"						██					
	"Create a University Student Profile"								██			
	"Let's talk about the Future"										██	
	"If you could ask about University, what would you like to know?"											██
	"What is education for?"										██	
Group Discussions	What is the difference between should, would or could?		██									
	What is the difference between a job, a career and a calling?						██					
	Success: is it something you have or you are?								██			
	Who do you think is successful?									██		
	Would you rather go to work or university when you finish school?							██				

When the research started in September 2016, the young people were in Year 7, 8 and 9. The majority of the data collection focused on the young people who were in initially in Years 7 and 8, and subsequently Years 8 and 9 in the 2017/18 academic year.

The data collection methods focused on observing and facilitating social interactions between the young people within Amberley Grove, with a particular focus on HE aspirations. The methods drew on the conceptual framework presented in this thesis of how HE aspiration may be formed in social interactions and the literature review of "most-able, least-likely" young people's HE aspirations. These enabled me to reflect on features of HE aspirations that incorporated the wider definition of HE aspiration, proposed on page 87 in section 2.3.4, that is, goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012); young people's knowledge of HE; interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities, including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014); levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education. It is an evolving process of (re-)articulation, shaped by a zero-sum game in which young people are guided to perform a play without a script, as argued in literature by Bok (2010) and Bourdieu (1990).

To develop the multi-method approach, this research drew on writers such as Pollard (2001) and Mannay (2016) who utilise inclusive, creative research methods to actively engage young people in research. These methods built on the epistemology and methodological approach of the research to position young people as active contributors to knowledge on HE aspiration and how it is formed.

4.5.1 Participant Observations

Central to this ethnographic case study is its substantial emphasis on observations as the main data collection method (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018:293). Over a 10-month time period between September 2016 – December 2016 and September 2017 - February 2018, I conducted participant observations in daily lessons of 16 "most-able, least-likely" young

people at Amberley Grove. In order to conduct the research, I secured the relevant ethical approvals and completed the school access protocols as outlined by Amberley Grove. I observed the pupils in three different types of activities over this time: in classroom settings, school-based research activities and in two off-site, university campus Saturday events.

Firstly, I conducted participant observations around three days per week during term time in the 16 young people's classroom settings. In order to facilitate this, I was provided with their lesson timetables alongside photographic identification of the young people. Below, in Table 4, is an example of the information included in the timetables.

Table 4 - Sample timetable format for young people's lessons

ID	Name	Preferred name, if different	Lessons		
			Mon – Lesson 1		
			Lesson	Teacher	Room

The young people's full timetables included the lessons, teachers and room for each of the six daily lessons (50minutes) and single tutor time-periods (20minutes) for every school day (Monday to Friday). The school was run on a single week rolling timetable.

During the 10 months, I entered lessons and observed the young people's interactions (regarding their educational experiences, aspirations and progressions) with their classmates as well as with staff and around school. An observation guide template is included in Appendix 2. This guide drew on my conceptual framework and definition of HE aspiration. Using the guide, I made notes on all references and interactions related to future plans and life beyond compulsory education made by the young people, their classmates and the school. As the case study was embedded within the contextual setting of Amberley Grove, I also observed and took notes on school billboards, posters and booklets, including those which alluded to institutional values and policy around HE aspiration. This provided unique insights into how HE, and aspiration to it, were publicised in this education setting. In addition, I logged, as far as possible, in my notes what information related to HE was disseminated specifically to the "most-able, least-likely" young people.

I observed lessons over two to three days per week (mainly Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays). I observed every young person in lessons at least once on each of these days, wherever

possible by accounting for absences. Observations varied from 10 minutes to the full 50 minute lessons, depending on the level of activity and interactions within the lessons. In lessons where the young people were instructed by school staff to complete work in silence, observations lasted approximately 10-15minutes. In lessons where greater interaction was encouraged between classmates, observations lasted up to the full 50 minutes . During the observations, I remained responsive to the classroom surroundings; I took a spectrum of research roles varying for example, from overt observer to a type of learning support staff member. From the 2017/18 academic year, the school installed a site-wide digital security system. As a result, school building doors on site were locked outside of lesson changeover times. To facilitate flexible movement around the school within lesson observations, during my time in school, I was given a key fob to unlock building doors. Between classroom observations, I was permitted to enter the staff room, where various staff members approached me to discuss topics related to HE aspiration. Secondly, I conducted observations during the group discussions and interactive activities. I video-recorded the young people during both these types of activities. I also took field notes on the activities to support the recordings. The sections below outline further details on how these data collection methods were used in the research.

The third type of participant observation was of off-site university campus widening participation events. The events were part of a two-year regional programme to "inspire them to consider university in the future" (Sutton Scholars, 2020). The university-based activities related to Amberley Grove's institutional policy and practice around HE aspiration. The events invite high academic achieving pupils in Years 8 and 9 from across the West Midlands region, who fit a variety of social and academic criteria. I organised attending these events as four of the young people involved in my research project were attending. I attended two University campus-based events, both held on Saturdays, one in December 2017 and the other in January 2018. Each event lasted from 8am to 4pm and I conducted observations on each Saturday. During my observations, I noted how the young people spoke about their HE aspiration and with whom.

The opportunity to observe the pupils in an offsite setting was particularly useful as, whilst it is mainly for ease of access, virtually all education research into young people's friendships and interactions are conducted in mandatory educational settings (Howe, 2010). The school context in itself, is an institution. It is a mandatory commitment on the part of the young people. Within it, structural hierarchies are imposed on them by the context, such as the staff and pupil dyad (Spencer & Doull, 2015) as well as generated out of the context, through the pupil to peer dyad. This may have repercussions for the conclusions researchers draw about how young people interact whilst in school, including relating to HE aspiration, or whilst at off-site events such as WP events. The participants may have felt more relaxed out of uniform and away from the structured nature of their school setting and day, to share their HE aspirations. Observing and engaging with the young people in out-of-school events related to HE aspiration, was an opportunity to observe interactions facilitated during these events, that may be particular to this alternate context.

4.5.2   Interactive Activities

Like Bok (2010), my research aimed to reposition HE aspiration as a concept of study *with* young people. Research that is conducted with and by participants is at the centre of participatory research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Although my research was not explicitly participatory in nature, I drew on this methodology to develop my interactive activities. This approach was explored as it offered an avenue to research with young people, by positioning the young people as co-constructors and interactors on the formation of HE aspiration. It also aimed to give the young people an interactive space to reflect on the formation of their HE aspiration; reflective space that it not largely afforded in the educational structure of the English school system.

The interactive activities were used to explore HE aspiration with the young people. There were six main activities during the 10 month field work. Firstly, the young people were asked to create a past-present-future life-story map, which they contributed to throughout the duration of the fieldwork: from September 2016 – February 2018. This involved them creating and decorating A2 posters of the key moments within their lives. An example of this poster is shown

in Appendix 6. The posters were used to explore the key timepoints that the young people felt were important to their understanding of their past, present and future. Uprichard (2011:104) outlines that "the future matters… in everyday life… to the lives of everybody… In order to study social objects in the present, narratives of the future that are associated with them are also important". As an exploration of the future, shaped also by the present and past, these posters offered an opportunity to contextualise the HE aspirations and plans for the future of the young people.

The other activities included scenario-based interactive activities which asked the young people in groups to:

1) "Map these UK Universities" (Appendix 8)

In pairs:

2) "Create a University Student Profile" (Appendix 9)

…and in individual activities to respond to:

3) "Let's talk about the Future" (Appendix 7)
4) "If you could ask about University, what would you like to know?" (Appendix 10)
5) "What is education for?" (Table 5 & 6, pg. 155/156)

All these activities were linked to the definition of HE aspirations used in the conceptual framework. In particular, they focused on the "*goal-driven plans for the future… young people's knowledge of HE, interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities…*"

These activities were held in separate Year group sessions. This was largely in response to limited interactions between Year groups. During my initial term in the school, the young people in Year 7 tended not to interact with older pupils. This was probably mainly due to shyness of juniors and relative seniority of older pupils. This dynamic appeared to have an impact on the interactions of the Year 7 pupils, in that they did not converse. The Year 8s would dominate the space, and interactions between the Year 7 young people were negligible. In response to this and combined with scheduling and room capacity demands, I conducted the

interactive activities in separate Year groups. However, I recognised that HE aspiration is an evolving concept and that all the individual young people contribute to the wider concept of HE aspiration. To explore this, in Chapter 5, I combined and detailed by each individual, the interactions and formations of HE aspiration, to illuminate the wider conceptualisation of HE aspiration and how it is formed.

During both types of activity, the young people would discuss the questions with each other. In the paired activities, the pair would write down joint responses, whilst in the individual activities, the young person wrote, shared or illustrated their responses. These interactive activities were used as data collection methods to promote the young people's sustained participation in the research. The researcher also aimed to facilitate a research space that enabled the young people to feel empowered to share their knowledge of HE aspiration in discussion with their classmates (Wilkins and Burke, 2015).

Being able to effectively engage participants in the task of data collection is an obstacle that must be negotiated by all researchers. In this case, I felt that utilising a participatory technique to collect data would offer a novel approach for the young people and would introduce them to the research process in an interactive manner. Cath Larkins and Young Researchers (2014) outline that making research fun, by using games or other interactive activities, is one of the most profitable ways to ensure young people remain involved in the process. In addition to this, utilising a participatory method helped the young people to build a rapport with each other as well as myself as the researcher.

Evaluating this method

Interactive activities were designed that were oriented towards the future, but others also invited young people to consider the past and present. By facilitating activities which were future oriented, this may have reinforced some of the challenges discussed in the literature review in which research activities and widening participation events encouraged young people to gravitate towards particular HE pathways and aspirations, and encourage recruitment (Kettley, 2007). However, using a variety of interactive activities, the young people were encouraged to not only interact about features of higher education, but also interrogate

and converse with each other, as well as individually, around a holistic view of HE aspiration, that included their past and present knowledge. The activities were not just about higher education but also about other features and paths for their futures which they could also self-determine. Considering the nature of educational success encouraged the young people to interact about the value that they placed on education. This offered an opportunity to explore questions about the value of education and schooling, rather than focus on the discipline specific activities which are often explored in WP activities, discussed for example in the literature review.

4.5.3 Group discussions

The fieldwork also involved the facilitation of group discussions. I facilitated five group discussions over the course of this time. This data collection method yielded data around group interactions and dynamics, as well as HE aspiration, which may not otherwise be available. This was particularly important in this research as it offered an opportunity for the young people to have an open forum to discuss, voice their opinions and interact with each other, whilst also providing the researcher with an informed understanding of the group interactions and hierarchies (Cohen et al, 2013).

Acocella (2012) suggests that one of the values of the method is in the types of interaction which emerge through the course of the discussion. Every session was attended by almost all of the pupils, and they were held in joint Year group sessions. The questions explored in the group discussions included open questions:

- "What is the difference between should, would or could?"
- "What is the difference between a job, a career and a calling?"

…and closed questions:
- "Success: is it something you have or you are?"
- "Who do you think is successful?"
- "Would you rather go to work or university when you finish school?".

For the open-question group discussion, each young person was given a paper and pencil and asked to consider or write their responses and they were welcome to share those with the group. For the closed question group discussions, I invited the young people to indicate a position of agreement by standing on one side of the room. Then I asked the students to discuss their position with their relative sub-group and invited the sub-groups to feed back to the wider group. During the discussions, I collected ethnographic notes on the young people's discussions.

Evaluating this method

Group discussions were an important method of data collection in my research as they offered an opportunity for me to be an "attentive observer" of the discussions between the individuals (Weller, 2019:4). Reflecting on work by Weller (2019), my priority was to collate and analyse the discussions between the young people. In utilising this approach, I ensured I considered the role of power relations amongst the young people, as recommended in seminal work by Ibáñez (1995, 2002, translated in Weller, 2019). They emphasise the importance of choosing the right types of participants for the group discussions. Through my early observations, I recognised the power dynamics between the less vocal Year 8 pupils and more out-spoken Year 9 pupils. In order to address these challenges in facilitating group discussions as a data collection method with these young people, I facilitated open question group discussions in mixed year groups sessions, whilst I facilitated the closed question group discussions in singular year group sessions. This allowed the young people to have greater time for reflection on the closed questions, as the groups were smaller.

4.6   Ethical considerations

This section details the ethical considerations that shaped the methods outlined above. Academia is often criticised for adopting an auxiliary nature to its ethical considerations. Given the exploratory nature of this research from its inception, literature was consulted to align formal ethical processes with ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations of including young people in research. Key literature around research ethics was explored and employed. These included BERA's ethical guidelines for education research (BERA, 2018), as well as ethical and epistemological considerations for conducting research with children and

young people (Mayall, 2000; Uprichard, 2010; Alderson, 2014; Mannay, 2016). Prior to conducting the data collection, ethical approval was received, in line with the University of Warwick's guidelines, to collect data in Amberley Grove, as well as in a University campus widening participation event.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were assigned a random confidential reference number and their data was collected and stored in relation to this reference number. Unique personal identifiers were removed from the dataset and pupils were pseudonymised. Participant wellbeing was also monitored verbally throughout the research; the young people, their parents or carers - were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. During the early stages of my data collection, I found that audio recording was insufficient to distinguish the young people's discussions in the research activities, one from another, and so decided to use video recording. Issues exist around the use of video in research, particularly with children and young people (Robson, 2011; Eglinton, 2013; Everri et al, 2020). To limit these issues and safeguard the pupils, I ensured that I sought relevant ethical approvals as well as school approvals from senior leaders. I also received additional verbal consent during each activity from all of the pupils that they were happy for me to video-record. No images of any of the young people were included in any part of the research. All media used within the process of data collection, was stored securely or destroyed. No images were reproduced for use beyond the research.

Given the collaborative nature of this research, maintaining the complete anonymity of the school proved challenging. Ethical considerations were explored as to how the research findings may be publicised in non-academic spheres. To assure confidentiality, no reference has been made to the actual name of the school or the Academy Trust in publications by the researcher; the name of the school was also randomly pseudonymised to Amberley Grove. The geographical location of "Birmingham" was used as a general location in publication, as it was culturally meaningful to the research.

4.6.1   Fieldwork-specific approval

In line with the School's health and safety and safeguarding policies, I completed enhanced DBS checks, one for each academic year of data collection. I liaised with a member of the School's senior leadership team (SLT) and was subsequently granted approval to enter lessons to conduct ethnographic observations. The member of the SLT also kindly liaised with teaching staff to excuse relevant pupils from lessons to participate in research activities.

Overall, having discussed these considerations with the senior members of school staff, it was expressed that the focus of the research on HE aspiration significantly aligned with the school's priorities for encouraging the young people to consider HE as a future plan. Staff felt that it aligned with school policy on high attaining pupils attending widening participation opportunities. Despite the young people all being selected to participate in the research due to their previously high attainment, some who took part in the research were underachieving, relative to their prior Level 5 attainment and "most-able, least-likely" counterparts in Amberley Grove. Less is known from the literature about how these young people form their HE aspiration. These students are not often "invited", "included" or "selected" for widening participation activities. By including prior attainment as a criteria for inclusion in the study, this research aimed to ensure that "most-able, least-likely" young people at Amberley Grove with varying current attainment were included, rather than excluded, within the case study. This was important as the research was focused on maximising participant voice through this WP research. Whilst discussion on the identification and focus on engagement with high-attaining pupils is discussed in the literature review, ethical considerations were made in removing these young people from their classes to participate in the research.

4.7   Role of the researcher

This section explores how I experienced my time conducting the research, as well as my positioning as an ethnographic researcher, relative to the participants within the research.

The ethnographic researcher

In order to conduct the ethnographic research, I embedded myself within the daily experiences of the "most-able, least-likely" young people. By conducting participant observations, interactive activities and group discussions, I aimed to explore how HE aspiration was formed.

However, the main role of an ethnographic researcher is to observe daily life as it occurs, "not try to interfere with or influence events or change participants' behaviours" (Shagrir, 2017:11). In this endeavour, my role as an ethnographic researcher whilst collecting data through observations, interactive activities and group discussions, was to observe and facilitate activities, rather than to focus on a specific viewpoint or pathway of HE aspiration. I shared with the young people, that I was a researcher at Warwick University, and also told them what my GCSE, A-Level choices were and what my undergraduate degree was in, but only because they directly asked. I outlined that this research was related to their plans beyond compulsory education and that I was not advocating for a particular pathway, post-compulsory education.

As an ethnographic researcher, my role within Amberley Grove involved striking a balance between researcher, confidante of the young people, doctoral student and even sometimes member of staff. Firstly, reflecting on the conceptual framework, my role as a researcher was to observe and note how the young people and their classmates form HE aspirations through their interactions. These interactions by the young people were often proposed in ad hoc, or sometimes sporadic exchanges, interspersed and juxtaposed alongside other topics that were linked to their HE aspirations, such as their plans for the future, as well as their educational and wider social identities. To explore this in my role as an ethnographic researcher, I captured the snippets and narrations of the young people's interactions on HE aspirations and completed detailed fieldnotes to reflect on my own time in the field at the end of each day. In addition, I interrogated the fieldnotes and transcripts that I produced, and (re-)presented the ethnographic data, initially as vignettes of each young person to illuminate insights on each of the young people. This was also whilst moderating my own ethnographic voice and recognising the conflicts presented by my own standpoints (Gullion, 2016). My main position in the research was to share a story of the interspersed school interactions that contribute to the formation of young people's HE aspiration; a concept that continues to develop and shift over time. As discussed in work by Brooks (2003b), young people do not necessarily speak at length about HE aspirations, but reflecting on the conceptual framework, I recognised that there were likely school interactions at play that were embedded within the school setting that linked the development and formation of HE aspirations over time. As van Maanen (2011:102) suggests, "The story itself, the impressionist's tale, is a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined."

To share the findings of the research using the ethnographic approach, in Chapter 5, I have written in a way that "blends poetic moments with academic ones" (Gullion, 2016:12). This research presents thick description of the interactions around the young people's HE aspirations using two of the main types of ethnographic tales; impressionist and confessional tales (van Maanen, 1988). The impressionist writings feature as the main body of text in the findings and they illuminate on the nuanced occurrences around HE aspiration in the young people's daily school experiences, whilst the confessional texts offer insights into my experiences as a researcher in the field (Beck, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2003). Each of the 16 young people that participated in the research, were written about in separate passages within the findings, which detail signals and link the interactions between the young people.

In addition, Sim's (2016) reflections on her doctoral experience as an ethnographic researcher offered me researcher empathy and methodological comfort as I grappled with my role as a type of confidante within the field. Sim writes that "In the different environments in which my fieldwork takes place, I was, at times, variously a 'friend', 'teenager', older cousin type, 'teacher', 'student', and blurry figure defying categorization." (pg. 74) but "…it is the constant presence of other adults (my 'home' community) that creates an awkward tension in my performances of identity…" (pg. 76) Like Sim, my appearance led to many people, some young, some old, almost daily mistaking me for a teenager, despite my teenage years being, in many ways thankfully, long behind me. Initially, I was worried that I would be perceived as a peculiar adult in the offsite observations; however, my early worries, like Sim's, proved woefully misplaced and misdirected. When observing the young people in lessons, whilst walking along the school corridors and when facilitating research activities in a classroom, the position of *out-of-place, strange* adult was felt far more intensely on the school site of Amberley Grove. Moving from room to room between lessons, was the norm for the young people during the school day. By also moving with the pupils between lessons, I aimed to gather a deeper understanding of what it was like for pupils at Amberley Grove, drifting and disorientated around the school after each 50 minute lesson; an emic perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

My role as a researcher was also impacted by both my formalised connections as student at my university and part-funded by Amberley Grove's Umbrella Academy Trust. These shaped and facilitated my sustained access to the school site throughout the case study. To negotiate access to observe off-site University campus WP events, I supported the WP practitioners to facilitate the University outreach programme. I created activities and moderated all the young people's homework submissions for the programme.

As an elder individual within the school, informally, I was also often urged to play a role as teaching assistant and cover- supervisor, to support the young people during their lessons or whilst they participated in WP activities. I was often ushered by school staff and colleagues to make myself useful, so to speak, in lessons and at events. During this time, I spoke to the young people in the classroom about their activity and offered insights into how I thought they could complete the task. This occurred in around twenty different lessons. To ensure this did not adversely reduce my ethnographic observations and writings, I would briefly note the interactions during the session and write more detailed fieldnotes in the school staffroom immediately after each session.

Overall, I used my time in the field to collect data on the young people's interactions around HE aspirations, constantly evolving my definition in response to the context.

The Black female researcher

In the literature, the negative educational experiences of certain ethnic and socio-economic groups are widely documented (Parsons, 2016; Richards, 2016; Mcduff, Tatam, Beacock, & Ross, 2018; Stockfelt, 2018). Less literary critique is given to the positive assets that these groups bring to the educational context. As I highlight in the Preface, to trawl through this sea of negativity, particularly as a Black woman, proved exhausting. This exhaustion manifested in this thesis as an occasional and deliberate shift in tone. The Preface pays homage to my unease within my role as a Black female researcher and the challenges it presented in exploring education research on ethnicity and socio-economic status. These included repeatedly justifying my legitimacy as a researcher collecting data in a multi-ethnic school context.

My persona and appearance, youthful, black or otherwise, I am quite sure, added to a growing sense of acceptance and a valued position as confidant, or any other "trusted" relation listed above, to the young people and their classmates. I remain uncertain about how my persona and appearance contributed to the adults' perceptions of me and my legitimacy in the field space; they were not the focus of my research, but did, on many occasions, have an impact on my position as a researcher. There was a constant need to establish my legitimacy to adults. Whether that was by not wearing my coat in the halls, not being out of class outside of lesson time, not being repeatedly late for morning registration or replying ...No, I am not on the teacher training programme here.... All these made me hypersensitive of my status as an outsider. It made me empathetic to the pupils' outcries at heightened surveillance at school.

Many school staff were wary of my presence outside of the staff room. They often necessitated a reference point for my place in school - usually as a trainee teacher position. Despite my utterances to the contrary, largely I could not just be a researcher. I also could not, for many staff, just be called Krystal by the pupils. Some even appeared deeply offended at the thought that the pupils would call me by my first name, and even implied that this may undermine their position of authority within the class.

Aligned to, but even more emotionally exhausting than establishing my legitimacy as an ethnographic researcher, was my growing awareness of my positionality as a black female exploring the aspiration of pupils of ethnic minorities. More than once was I quizzed by adults on my solutions to widen participation to selective higher education, specifically for Black Caribbean pupils. An encounter occurred when I asked for a participant to be excused from class for a moment for a short update about the research project, a staff member even asked if myself and a participant were related, clearly embarrassing both myself and the pupil; apparently, we "looked very similar". Further explorations are presented in the findings and discussed later in the thesis, considering the manner in which Black Caribbean pupils were discussed by staff and how this may have been related to the formation of HE aspirations of those "most-able, least-likely".

As an aspiring academic, it became increasingly familiar and difficult to fathom that my legitimacy in institutional spaces I had been approved to enter, was so readily challenged and undermined. I wondered throughout the research how young people regularly inhabiting these

spaces may feel in their time in school, and what role this may play in their school experience and their plans beyond school education.

4.8   Researching with children and young people

Over the last century, research into children and childhood has grown into a broad interdisciplinary field within the social sciences, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, representing a significant turning point in the internationally recognised view of the place of the child within all aspects of society (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). However, research involving young participants has been publicly criticised in recent years for failing to truly reflect their views (ibid.) and for underestimating the knowledge and competence of children and young people in relation to their ability to participate in the research process (Fraser, Flewitt & Hammersley, 2014). In my study, the young people understood their role within the research as participants who were contributing to how their aspirations to HE were constructed and how this may broaden knowledge of HE aspiration in WP research, policy and practice. These evolving definitions supported the ongoing reflections of the ethnographic research. This shaped the ongoing reflexivity of the researcher and the participants.

In addition, the nature of what HE aspiration is, rarely forms the subject of exploratory research with young people in a UK context. Despite often being the subject of academic and political WP research into HE aspiration, young people are rarely asked about what HE aspiration is. These limits curtail our understandings of young people's HE aspiration. My research aims to extend opportunities to know or challenge what HE aspiration is, by exploring HE aspiration knowledge with young people. This illumination of knowledge is in light of Mayall (2000:120), who writes that adults must "take account of children's knowledge in the work of trying to understand relationships between social groups". Throughout this thesis, I will aim constantly to refer to my participants' *knowledge*, rather than using other terms such as *understanding* or *perspective*. These latter terms imply a sense of transience, subjectivity and inferiority on the part of the young people; this potentially subdues the participant voice, which stands in conflict with the aim, through this research, to in fact maximise it. However, I am aware that ontological and epistemological considerations when researching with children and young

people, extend far beyond alterations in discourse and terminology. Using this term rather than others aims to offer preliminary reflections on the impact of research language in the WP field.

Uprichard (2010) referred to these constraints in contemporary theorising around research with children and young people as a "…discrepancy between theory and practice" (pg.3). Uprichard argues that whilst researchers theoretically position children as "active agents… when we examine the way that children are empirically involved in social research, we see another story" (pg.3). They outline that research in which children inform childhood should undoubtedly continue in the struggle to overturn mounting social injustice, but like Uprichard (2010), I am firm in my opinion that there is a growing need to establish a larger body of research in the UK in which marginalised populations "contribute to [research] fields other than" their marginalisation.

My research aimed to broaden opportunities to maximise whose knowledge around HE aspiration is known or heard. It emphasised that these young people were an essential topic of study, beyond factors seen as specific to their direct experience. My conceptual framework, whilst complex and exploratory, also leaves room to highlight relational nuances about the young people and their HE aspirations that may be otherwise overlooked. It proposed that aspiration formed at the intersections, the margins, or the peripheries may tell us more than we have theoretically appreciated before; experiences of those on the fringes of social influence offer a unique viewpoint from which to consider a plethora of phenomena. It advocates that under-researched populations should be consulted and inform theory and policy, on social factors more generally, not just aspects that may be seen to disproportionately affect their community, such as childhood, poverty, ethnicity and cultural diversity. Hopefully, this research will trigger further critique of the arbitrary use of mainstream research populations and begin to subvert the positioning of certain groups in society as destitute, problematic and intrinsically deficient.

That said, much of the WP research in the UK with those "most-able, least-likely", investigates research questions on what participants lack. At best, this will only ever return answers on their deficiencies. My thesis offers a novel approach to researching with children and young people

in the field of Widening Participation. This approach remains relatively unchartered; opportunities remain limited to consolidate WP research topics such as HE aspiration, with its theory and its practice. The main novelty in my research lies in its rephrasing of the questions that we ask of "most-able, least-likely" young people's HE aspirations. Rather than perpetuating a deficit narrative, it is focused on exploring who these young people are within their classroom interactions, how they articulate their aspirations, particularly their aspirations to HE, and how they form, negotiate and consolidate their HE aspirations.

4.9 Data analysis process and methods

"Ethnographers create ethnography in a sometimes tedious and often exhilarating two-step process of analysis of raw data and interpretation of analyzed data." (LeCompte, & Schensul, 2012 :2)

As discussed above, the study explored the social interactions of the young people about their HE aspirations. using a variety of data collection methods. Data was drawn from transcripts of the research activities, both written and video-recorded, the fieldnotes of the young people's exchanges, and the researcher's reflections, alongside school media on post-compulsory education plans. The young people's (non-)participation and engagement with wider institutional, HE-related activities was also logged, detailed and explored.

Figure 7 outlines the types of data that each collection method produced, as well as the method that was used to analyse the data:

Figure 7 - Links between Methods, Data and Analysis

Data collection method		
Interactive Activities		
Group discussions		
Observation		

Data

- Video Transcripts, recordings illustrations and captions
- List and location of school's media outputs and events relating to HE
- Ethnographic field notes including pupil timetables, subjects, room plans and interactions relating to HE

Strategies of Analysis

- Thick description and thematic analysis

Findings

- Vignettes of young people's discussions around HE aspiration
- Thick description and thematic analysis exploring the conceptual framework of HE aspiration formation of the young people at Amberley Grove School

As an ethnographic case study, the analysis started from the beginning of the fieldwork and data collection process. It continued as an ongoing process in which I repeatedly collected, analysed and reviewed my data (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010:197-200). In Chapter 5, the findings are presented using two approaches – i) through thick description and ii) using thematic analysis:

   i.   thick descriptions of the individual young people and their discussions and explorations of their HE aspirations

Thick description is the presentation of not only detail within the field, but context, emotion, intent and the social interactions between people (Denzin, 2001:100). Whilst in the field, I noted extensive detail on classroom interactions. However, to ensure my approach thickly described my observations , my fieldnotes began 'to [interpret] by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode" (Schwandt, 2007:296-297). As discussed below, Gullion (2016:75-78) demonstrates how thick description can be constructed and then used to develop vignettes.

The process involved in creating thick description is detailed below in the following steps:

1.	Created a comprehensive diagram of all the lessons, staff and locations for each young person's lesson timetable.	
2.	Negotiated with staff and the young people, selecting lesson times to conduct observations of the young people and plan interactive activities	
3.	Identified a strategic path around the school space to access and conduct regular classroom observations	
4.	Noted artefacts along these pathways across the school that mention HE, University and young people's aspirations and future plans	
5.	Entered classroom and school spaces before, during and after sessions, orienting and noted my position within the space and introduced myself to the staff and pupils	
6.	Guided by the conceptual framework, in sessions, I wrote descriptions of: (Initial foci, Subsequent evolving foci)	
	Contextual information about the setting What is the layout of the space? What is the date, place and time?	Interactions of the young people that mention or indicate: Higher education and University

	Where are staff and pupils located? Where are you located? Do people move? How do people interact with one another? Who is speaking and when? What are the levels of interactions within the space (silence, quiet, animated or otherwise)? How do I introduce myself to teaching staff, pupils and other staff around the school? How do they interact with me? What time and how do you enter and leave the space? What did the session involve? What imagery and literature is in the space? Are there explicit rules or clear expectations posted on the walls or outlined in the start of the lesson? When are these shared? Was the lesson being held by the scheduled staff member? Was the lesson timetabled or are pupils working off-timetable? What are people generally doing? How do they seem to be feeling? Does this change throughout the session?	Educational past, present, Post-16 and any future plans, and intent to achieve those Their educational self-confidence, -efficacy or -concept …and indicators of those through suggested or outlined roles and statuses in school Young people's expressions on prior, current or future attainment, successes in school, careers School and personal cultural references and people mentioned in relation to their education Additional educational activities, commitments and interests Cultural identity Subject choices, assessments and educational activity engagement Careers and WP provision and guidance, and the YPs engagement and selection for those Teaching Staff references to HE, University and career progression Young people's educational choice, priorities, values, agency and decision-making Social responsibilities, motivators, place in neighbourhood, country and global citizens
7.	Outlined in my fieldnotes, how I felt in the spaces and my daily/weekly reflections and commentary as I navigated my role around the school, with dates and times.	
8.	Noted verbatim phrases made by the pupils around HE aspiration. I also noted and described filler text and interjections that appeared to illuminate on the thoughts/feelings of the pupils.	
9.	Continuously engaged with young people throughout the fieldwork, discussing their interactions, providing regular fortnightly updates and developments on my observations to the pupils and half-termly to staff.	
10.	Reread the observations	
11.	Reflected on and adjusted the focus of the observations and activities in response to the evolving interactions of the young people and my position in the school	
12.	Created observation logs of the interactions in chronological order, including the dates and times of the interactions with details of the speaker(s) and receiver(s)	
13.	Reread the observation logs	

14.	Using the dates and times of the observation logs, fieldnotes and daily reflections, arranged the content to be read alongside each other		
15.	Reread the daily reflections and commentary from fieldnotes		
16.	I highlighted from the daily reflections and commentary:		
	The evocative verbatim text or poignant behaviours from the pupils that involved (non-)interactions on HE aspiration with their peers, teaching staff and/or me - as the researcher.	field notes on thoughts and feelings of the pupils and myself in sessions	References to HE aspiration in school artefacts
	Grouped these texts by dominant or passive speaker, as relevant		
	Interspersed the fieldnotes and daily reflections within the observation logs, developing the logs into ethnographic writings and thick descriptions.		

A further step involved using thick descriptions to create vignettes of each of the 16 young people (as presented in Chapter 5). Drawing on work by Gullion (2014, 2015, 2016), I use the vignettes to set the scenes of the young people's classroom interactions around HE aspirations for the reader. The vignettes are evocative little stories, depicting the everyday school life and interactions of the young people (Erickson, 1986:150). My vignettes focus on describing the young people in their context (Masterclass, 2020). They provide snapshots of the young people, offering evocative as well as nuanced pictures of everyday interactions around their plans beyond compulsory school education (LeCompte and Schensul, 2013:269). They are used as tools to support the reader to begin to grasp the analytical conclusions of the researcher (Schöneich, 2021:115).

Work by Jacobsen (2014) used vignettes which included verbatim text enveloped by ethnographic thick description to illuminate the reader on the ongoing activity of classroom scenes. Particularly relevant for my use of vignettes in this ethnographic case study was Jacobsen's development of the concept of vignettes as presented by Erickson (1986) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Jacobsen (2014) also creates short vignettes which extend over 18 months. They advocate for these extended timepoints in some vignettes, in order to emphasise the "the relational focus which was seen as vital in the analysis in order to enable the creation of an understanding reaching beyond an individual direct statement" (Jacobsen, 2014:48). Unlike in wider qualitative social science, where vignettes are often used as a research method,

in my ethnographic approach, vignettes are used to depict scenes from the researcher's perspective which occurred in the field (Schöneich, 2021).

The vignettes are presented in Chapter 5 in medias res. As the ethnographic researcher in this research, I played a role of narrator guiding the audience through the field and aimed to immerse the audience in the action and analytic processes of their case study. Presented through vignettes of the young people, the analysis pieced together the dynamics of the young people within the school settings through their interactions. My chapter 5 vignettes served as "a wonderful foil to the supremacy of coding and coding-derived analysis" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 664). However, to counteract this, the thick description, alongside the context explored in chapter 3 of the thesis, provided context to the socio-economic backdrop of Amberley Grove and takes an evolving and reflexive approach. The thick description often appears to be a non-sequential non linear approach. Challenges of doing ethnographic research with young people in the field are particular, though not exclusive, to this type of approach (Knupfer, 1996). They suggest that the somewhat sporadic narratives that young people use to attribute meaning to their worlds, also hold power to shape and guide the developing analysis, conceptual frameworks and narration of these ethnographic studies.

ii.   thematic analysis of the young people's discussions around aspects of HE aspiration

Drawing on recent work by Kiger & Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is used in this research to understand patterns of experiences and behaviours. My analysis focuses on understanding young people's HE aspiration. During the interactive activities outlined above, the young people were invited to express their knowledge of aspects related to HE aspiration. Once these activities were completed, I analysed the data for patterns and collated the data into key themes, which indicated additional knowledge of HE aspiration. As a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, there is no universal approach to conducting thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Reflecting on the process of thematic analysis proposed by Nowell, Norris, White,. and Moules (2017), the process used to thematically analyse the field notes and the transcripts of the research activities included firstly familiarising myself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and spending prolonged time within the field collating other data to triangulate the findings. Then, I generated initial codes within the data, by

outlining words within the young people's responses and discussions that linked to HE aspiration, followed by identifying and reviewing key themes within this data. During my time within the field I also re-defined and revisited the themes, to re-affirm the findings from the ongoing ethnographic data. Finally I produced a report of the themes, illuminated by thick description of the field notes, and continuously informed by engaging with the young people throughout the fieldwork. The thematic analysis is outlined in the findings in Chapter 5, where it is contextualised through the addition of related thick description.

4.10 Summary

The chapter has outlined how and why the methodological framework was used to explore the conceptual framework and research questions. Social constructivism as an epistemological approach allowed the research to move beyond the contemporary literary discussions of what HE aspiration is, to recognise young people's role in shaping this concept and how it is shifted and formed on a micro-level by the interactions that young people have with each other, within the context of their school, with its evolving institutional priorities. By exploring the concept with high prior academic attainers, in a socio-economically deprived area, this research also seeks to challenge the political and institutional framing of these young people as deficit; acknowledging that they hold and form aspirations for HE and otherwise. The methods used served to explore the diverse contexts in which young people interacted about HE aspiration. My role as a researcher overall was to observe, build rapport with and record the somewhat sporadic interactions that the young people held about HE aspiration, whilst moderating my position in the field, firstly as an immersed ethnographic researcher and secondly as a black female researcher. The ethnographic approach to the case study resulted in thick descriptions of the young people, the school context and my experiences within the field. These draw on the conceptual framework to understand who each individual was within the research, from the perspective of the researcher, in vignettes. The data was also analysed through thematic analysis to present the themes that young people discussed in relation to their evolving formations of their HE aspiration. They are detailed in the following chapters and offer insights into how they shared and interacted around HE aspiration.

5 Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the ethnographic case study exploring how young people form their HE aspirations. The data was collected through observations of the young people and their school, as well as interactive activities and group discussions around the concept of HE aspirations. The observations were held over a 10 month period, with the interactive activities and group discussions held monthly over a six-month period. . To conduct the observations, I was guided by the observation schedule outlined in Appendix 2; underpinned by the broad definition of HE aspiration used within the conceptual framework. However, the researcher was also keen to explore how the young people themselves discussed the concept and how it was developed by them in school. Illuminated by the observations of the young people focusing in particular on how they discussed HE aspiration as well as ongoing data analysis, the researcher facilitated interactive activities and group discussions around young people's evolving discussions related to HE aspiration. The findings exploring how young people form their HE aspirations are detailed in two over-arching sections. Both sections focus on exploring the research questions of –

1. What is Higher Education aspiration for these young people in this school?
2. How do the young people discuss and interact with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and with their school about their HE aspirations?
3. How do these classmates and their school play a role in the young people's formations of HE aspirations?

Firstly, presented through ethnographic thick description, I outline fifteen vignettes of the young people and their discussions around HE aspiration in their school. The vignettes are entitled with each of the pseudonymised names of the 16 young people that took part in the research. Through thick description, I present in the vignettes, not only the young people's discussions of their HE aspirations, but also commentary, suppositions, dynamics and context for the young people, their classmates and the wider school setting's formations of HE aspiration. The thick description presented, also offers insights to the reader of the wider educational, career and cultural identities that the young people shared with the researcher.

Secondly, I present further ethnographic thick description and thematic analysis of the young people's HE aspirations within the school context and my observations as the researcher. This second section presents findings related to aspects of the wider conceptualisation of HE aspiration, as outlined in the conceptual framework. It then draws on the research activity around these young people's 'big events' to present findings that expand the conceptualisation. These consider temporal factors that young people discuss in relation to HE aspiration, some of which are not currently accounted for nor formally articulated by the conceptualisation.

Finally, drawing on observations, group discussions and fieldnotes, this section further considers how these young people may develop HE aspiration as an evolving process in conjunction with others, including their classmates and within the context of their school.

5.2   Sharing young people's HE aspiration

Too easily is the notion of 'Higher Education Aspiration' in much academic and policy research studies, simplified to the mere question, "Would you like to go to university?" and other closed examples. Whilst these surface-level questions offer brief insights into an individual's intentions, they offer little in the way of a complex exploration of the evolving, culturally-specific aspirations for higher level study. Young people and their aspirations are much more complex than we often account for in social research; their voice and aspirations are often lost in simple closed questions.

My research explored beyond this surface, to begin to document how some young people "most able but least-likely" to participate in highly-selective HE institutions construct their aspiration in everyday life and in conjunction with their classmates and in their school. As discussed in the literature review, the young people who participated in the study attended a school with high levels of family poverty and relatively low pupil progression to higher education. Whilst these labels and other statistics often make headlines, they arguably position "most-able, least-likely" young people as "lacking what it takes" to succeed without help. Instead, this research aims to show these "most-able, least-likely" young people that their voices and contributions are valued within the research process, and potentially can be respected in WP discourse and across HE more widely. The young people enjoyed sharing their

knowledge about their HE aspiration; insights which often go untold, unheard, or are even ignored at research, practice or policy level within the Higher Education landscape. Using ethnographic thick description, the following vignettes offer insights into the everyday conversations around HE aspiration and provide context to the evolving developments of HE aspirations and positionings of the young people with their high-prior attaining classmates. Drawing on the conceptualisation of HE aspiration in the conceptual framework, these vignettes aim to share the nuanced and fleeting utterances and observations that also contribute to the formation of young people's HE aspiration in the daily interactions with school and their classmates. HE aspiration rarely formed the basis of whole conversations or sustained discussions with and between young people. Rather, plans to attend university were more often discussed in school sporadically and in passing, both positively and negatively by young people , in relation to other topics around HE aspiration. These vignettes draw on data from observations of the young people in their school and in an offsite activity, as well as interactive activities and group discussions with their classmates; data seldom captured through other methodological approaches.

5.2.1   Amanda and Mya

"...It all depends on what GCSEs I get!" Amanda exclaims when asked about her Higher Education aspirations. Mya whips her head around to her best friend, slightly surprised at Amanda's announcement. A look of "What do you mean?! It's not all about OUR GCSEs, is it?" falls across Mya's face. The "our" is important – they have been best friends since the first day of primary school. They do practically everything together, including this project, and discuss everything, even their plans for the future. However, this appears to be the first time they have shared with each other what they believe shapes their future. Their goals may appear to be similar, but their journeys and priorities, beyond the obvious, may vary widely. Amanda is waiting until her GCSE results to consolidate her educational aspirations and her future more generally. For some aspirers, somewhat like Amanda, the process of applying to higher education starts at a very young age. Not only are their GCSE and A-Level subjects strategically chosen to optimise their higher education choices, but in many cases, the secondary, and even sometimes the primary, school they attend has been a well-thought through process in a long-term goal of enhancing that pupil's university options.

When probed for further discussion about her plans/goals for the future, Amanda consistently refers to making decisions after and as a result of their GCSE results: not before. Mya, however, is undeterred by Amanda's adamant tone and is far more relaxed in her knowledge about her future. Unlike her best friend's "after GCSEs, then what?", whilst Mya wonders what GCSEs she will obtain, Mya's future plans stretch beyond GCSE results day to include whether she will be driving a car and what job she will have. Despite being best friends, they are insistent about their personal priorities for the future. Their surprise at their difference of opinion remains just that… they have been friends for a long time after all.

But this conversation around their Higher Education aspirations, which has clearly struck a nerve with the pair, sparks new discussion about the young people's recent GCSE subject choices. The frustration about GCSE subject choices reverberates across the room with unanimous nods and outcries from the Year 9 participants. Amanda waits for hushed tones from her peers and begins to articulate their anguish. "Miss…" she says "…We do Music lessons outside of school and could (or would) have taken it at GCSE but we wouldn't be able to do Triple Science. Our families and teachers said Triple Science was most important to take for A-Level choices and to get into University!" She continues that when it comes to GCSE subject choices, for them "…should, could and would are practically the same, Miss!" - they feel constrained in what they perceive they can, will or should study. Most participants expressed similar frustrations that what they choose to study at GCSE level is impacted more by the subject stream they take, rather than seeing all their GCSE options as possibilities of what they may be able to do.

Amanda and Mya are explored as a pair here, as I rarely encounter them apart. There are a few instances where they engage with their Aspiration separately and they are almost exclusively referred to by their classmates and school staff as a duo. They study similar GCSE subjects and frequent many of the same extra-curricular activities, in school and outside. Their summer holidays abroad to ancestral homes, even if they are to different destinations, are big events for both. However, on occasion, Amanda and Mya aka Mya and Amanda, for very brief moments, ride solo. Mya dreams of success and a job she is passionate about, whilst Amanda shares that, her dream for the future is to do her best; when she falls just short of her best, she will learn from it to do better. Doing her best appears to drive Amanda, who unlike Mya,

holds multiple school leadership positions. Amanda is often elected as a spokesperson for her peers, sometimes casually, sometimes more formally. During my time at Amberley Grove, Amanda became the youngest pupil to be elected college captain – a title given to a pupil chosen to represent and voice opinions from their respective school college at meetings with the school's senior leadership team. On the other hand, Mya is more introvert. On the rare occasions where Mya is without Amanda, be that in her Geography lessons, her form group or during the off-site university campus visit, Mya is quiet. However, Mya's demeanour should not be mistaken for reticence. When she does speak to the group, she often silences the room with her rarer but well-articulated utterances. Both Mya and Amanda, quietly and self-assuredly command respect - or maybe as a pair, it becomes a dyadic or dual assurance, whether together and apart.

5.2.2   Jessica

Jessica, a friend and classmate of Amanda and Mya, becomes noticeably disengaged with the project during the research activities which asked specifically about university plans. She was hardly the most outspoken of the group, choosing to express more through detailed and intricate images and neatly written words. However, Jessica had now chosen to openly abstain from these research activities. I ask her over to a quieter section of the room and query why she now didn't have any questions about University, especially given that she had previously expressed a desire to go. She stated, "...but Krystal, this activity isn't for me, I don't want to go to university, I want to go to Art school!" Of course, her point, as always, was valid; these research activity questions were specifically exploring University aspirations. Having explained that she didn't have to go to University to study Fine Art but that she could choose to go to University to study it and that some Art Schools were based in Universities, she replied, "...Really Miss?!" Jessica's eyes widened and she skipped back to her chair.

The next session revealed a new re-energised Jessica, who, completely undirected, had found out some information about potential art schools, courses and requirements, which she cannot wait to share with me. She's jumped at the chance to explore this new frontier. When asked about her future, Jessica explains "I've been thinking about it a lot because I'm finding school difficult, Miss. I feel like I'm gonna fail because I don't listen in lessons. I try to but I just find it hard Miss... If I fail school, how will this affect my future. My parents want me to go tutoring

Miss but I already don't like school… Honestly Miss like what's the point of going to more school outside school?!" I muse, pondering Jessica's clearly articulated argument. I attempt to offer an empathetic look. She continues by explaining that she wants to leave Amberley Grove and go to a provision? elsewhere that has been advertised to the Year 9 students. At this point, Sophia and Marianne chime in, "Jessica, are you leaving?" to which she sulks, "No! I want to but my parents won't let me!"

It can't come as too much of a surprise then, that all of Jessica's big life events are based in the future – maybe for Jessica, there is a feeling that now is when life begins, the world is her oyster. At 18, she will be going to Art school to do Fine Art and Fashion design, in line with her dream to follow a career as an artist or fashion designer. After Art School, graduation is on the horizon, as well as "travel around the world and visit the 7 wonders of the world" and the importance of her social and moral responsibility means that she will be "helping babies in poorer countries". But interestingly, Jessica starts her exploration of her future unlike any of the other young people. She starts her future with an unequivocal achievement. She writes and asserts in the future perfect tense – "[I will have] Sold my first painting". Here, Jessica is focused on writing this into existence; her 14-year-old self will have completed or perfected her future. Jessica's other big events are written in the simple present and future format, like her peers. Maybe this first phrase stating she will have "sold her first painting" presents a positive affirmation, that Jessica needs to utter about her future in the face of her current educational discontent.

5.2.3   Rita

Rita, one of the youngest in the group, is always the first to help; handing out papers, notifying students of upcoming research activities, fetching students from lessons – staff usually nod knowingly when I explain the purpose of my research and confirm that Rita is a participant. Unlike most of the other students, she shares a lengthy list of activities she does outside of school: swimming, bhangra dancing, board games, video games and she spends time with her family – I even see her at a local park one day with her family, whilst I am there with my daughter. She also proudly explains that she attends a local university widening participation programme, "…nobody else from this group goes though Miss!" … "No-one at all?" I reply. She

looks around and counts on her fingers. Shaking her head, she turns back to look at me, "No Miss - just me from here!"

Throughout the project, Rita, clearly has her future on her mind and openly shares her definitive careers plans, with little hesitation. Unlike the majority of her peers who appeared less confident about their future jobs, eleven-year old Rita is going to be, "Miss, not just a teacher, but a head teacher!". However, by the final research activity, when asked if you should follow a specific path in the future or make it up as you go along, Rita, now aged 12 replies, "Make it up, do whatever you want. You can change jobs if you want." Maybe this was her way of openly justifying what had now become her confident change in career aspiration. Rita is now sure she wants to be an engineer – inspired, in her words, by her dad, "I want to be an engineer Miss, cuz I think it will be better - and my dad agrees too, and he'll know because he's an architect".

Rita's mind is not just on her career plans. She also has an eye on where she is going to live "Maybe Canada" she explains, "I like it and I go there every year. It's clean and there's lots of opportunities". For Rita, her future plans are to "get a dream job, be happy... and raise a nice family". But her plans don't stop there; Rita is principled, "determined" and has a long list of big world problems she would also like to solve. She asserts "Well Miss, maybe world peace and global warming... Also, gender inequality – I don't think that people should be treated differently because they choose to live their lives differently – for example, like when men wear makeup and also women being paid less... but you've got protecting endangered species and also racism Miss, well just when people treat other people differently – like I know it happens but I don't like it!"

5.2.4   Marianne

Marianne, second of four children and first of three daughters in her family, is taller than her peers, confident and quick-witted; and she knows it! When asked what others would say are her best qualities, she reports being "brave", a "loud speaker", and noted for being good at Physical Education and debating. She talks flippantly about the things she does outside of school – eats, sleeps, watches TV... and attends Asian weddings! Family births and family marriages make up a significant proportion of big events in Marianne's life. The plans and

talents that she shares, are largely centred around her parents and her culture, even down to only thinking about the future "when I'm around my parents".

Marianne's plans are concise: "Marriage and a job!" - almost certainly in that order, she suggests. Her talents even more brief – she can cook Asian food. She is almost passive-aggressive, when she talks about how she will spend her time in the future, "With my kids...", she interjects, "to give them the childhood I never had – I never went to a beach until I was 13, Miss. Can you believe that?" That she hadn't been to the beach before that point, has clearly been shared by Marianne - with endless surprise from her listeners. This beach trip has become a big and fond event for Marianne; it is even up there with the births and marriages. It has even come to shape how she will raise any future children. In ten years' time, she saw herself "...In Dubai, with a family, away from my parents. Married!" Marianne turns to Amanda for support and exclaims "You know what it's like with Asian families!" to which Amanda feels free to reply "Yeah, being Asian we have no choice!" Clearly, neither participant is implying that they are unable to make personal choices about their future. Instead, what I believe, they are expressing is a respect for a cultural impact and duty on their plans and aspiration.

5.2.5   Samuel

Like many boys his age, Samuel enjoys playing on games consoles and watching TV. He's smart but quiet, somewhat reserved. By Year 8, he is almost vacant in both the classroom and project group discussions. It would have been easy to attribute his silence to a symptom of early adolescence and a way for him to shy away from divulging his knowledge about his future. But then a breakthrough... his one-word answers and his singular remarks of "Here, Miss" in group discussions at the beginning of the project, are replaced one day, with a detailed insight into his nuanced educational and cultural experience and how these continuously shape his aspiration for the future.

Samuel, like the other participants, was exceptional; even if he didn't "feel particularly gifted or talented" and refers to his skills as "just skills". His knowledge offered fresh research insights into the construction of Aspiration for young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly those whose heritages also hail from outside of the UK. Samuel spoke at least two languages and is of dual heritage. He wrote "I was born in Britain but I'm [the other nationality]

because its says that in my passport. My mom is [the other nationality] and my dad is Indian. I'm part [the other nationality], Indian and I think I'm a bit British." (One nationality has been removed to preserve the anonymity of the participant.)

Whilst many people around the UK and the world have dual heritage, few have the opportunity to be educated simultaneously, in more than one academic tradition. Samuel's education is shaped by having been educated and assessed in two academic systems in tandem, the English system and overseas. He uses both experiences as a way to develop his language and academic capabilities, drawing on advantages of both nations' systems. On the surface, this experience may be perceived as educational tourism; I would argue this interpretation is far too superficial. For Samuel, this nation, his mother's ancestral home, is somewhere he travels each year to complete school tests, and where he has lots of friends.

His first trip there, aged 1, made his list of big events. He likes the climate and speaks the language fluently. In general, travel abroad forms many of Samuel's other big life events, including a recent trip to his father's ancestral home. He explains that his parents are keen for him to maintain his education abroad, as well as in the UK, to widen his future options.

When thinking about his future, he thinks particularly about the job that he would like to do. Samuel has settled on a petroleum engineer. He explains, reluctantly, that this is partly because he is good at building things and likes "working out how things work", but it will enable him to travel, particularly to this other nation. Whilst, Samuel states that he imagines still living in England in ten years' time, he deliberates for a short while about whether he will work in England or in the other nation beyond that. For Samuel, he prefers this other nation because his "whole family's there"; his connection to it shapes who he is: what he knows about his past, his present and his future.

5.2.6   Gabby

On one specific occasion, I recall, leaving school feeling completely overwhelmed by my day's observation. I wrote furiously about my efforts to observe one participant, Gabby, in a lesson, where she sat placidly, whilst her lesson descended into something resembling Rome burning! Who knew that combining the end of term with a supply teacher, a classroom with rearranged

furniture, 25 interactive tablets and multiple pupils entering class late, in-lesson shrieking, hair braiding and aimless classroom wandering, would be a recipe for disaster, rather than quiet, attentive academic engagement. My participant, Gabby, is sat slumped across her desk, pen in hand and a worksheet placed neatly on the desk in front of her. Her gaze met mine more than once with a look somewhere on the scale between "Help me!" and "Do you see what I have to put up with?". Suffering from sensory overload, I politely excuse myself from the room. I feel guilty; am I leaving my participant to endure this chaos?

This isn't the first time that I sympathise with Gabby's anguish. It's October 2017 and the Year 9 participants have chosen their GCSE subject choices. I am aware these "choices" have created a stir amongst the group as they mutter about it incessantly during lessons. With subject choice being future-oriented, informed by preferences in the present but constrained by institutional policy, I was keen to explore their subject choice knowledge and how they have negotiated choosing GCSE subjects amongst themselves. In order to study this further, one of the research activity questions asked "What subjects would you have chosen to take at GCSE, if you could have chosen others instead?". I get them to write these down. Gabby sighs and scribbles on her paper ferociously, "The subjects I wish i'd chosen was sociology, but the school wasn't going to run it". Though the session has ended, Gabby's comments stick and she is clearly annoyed about the hand she has been dealt. Later, I pass her in the corridor, which is surprisingly quiet for the time of day. She explains wanting to take Sociology as one of her GCSE subjects; she wants to study it at A-Level. If she'd had a choice, she wouldn't have taken Finance as its boring and "not even a GCSE subject". She's unable to take a different subject though as it wouldn't fit with her other subject choices. "You just get a certificate - but I don't know what to do with it", Gabby complains.

For Gabby, events in her past pale in comparison to the big plans she has for the future. Beyond being born, Gabby is a forward-thinker, with her big events positioned firmly after her time at Amberley Grove. Gabby will be attending a "great college", then on to university and Graduation! After gaining her "first job to pay for [her] needs, whilst designing and promoting clothes", she will pursue her dreams of becoming a fashion designer, come runway model and actress. At "27", the only age of note, she will be "Married and Earning!" to "Support family". This big event is followed by none other than one to "Give back some money to homeless

shelters & animal charities to stop cruelty". You may be wrong to assume that Gabby's dreams for fame and influence are close to self-indulgent.

5.2.7   Rose

Rose's weekly routine is simple – three days a week, she goes straight home, and on Wednesdays and Fridays, like clockwork, she visits her Nan after school. When asked "Does your Nan live close?", Rose explains that her Nan lives in Wheeler's Brook (about 3 miles away) so "Well, no", she pauses, "we have to catch a bus to get there". Importantly, Rose's reference to place and the concept of travel extends beyond mere daily routine and appear very important to Rose, in her knowledge of her future. Rose, in thinking about her future, thinks about "Just what to do as a job", but her recounts also mention a plethora of places outside her home town:

- Before working she would like to go to Jamaica, as it is where her family is from, and she hasn't been before.

- She wants to stay in the UK to study

- She feels that "most of the good [universities] are in London" and would like to go to University, specifically Cambridge

- In ten years' time, she sees herself having a job as a paediatrician in London where

  she has not only attended university but now also relocated to.

- She imagines one day living "outside of Birmingham" and would like to solve the big

  world problem of "Litter where [she] lives".

Rose clearly wants to "follow a specific path" even though "a few unexpected things are possible". She's "been searching for internships" and "looking up what's needed" for her paediatric career of the future. Even potential hobbies in her future, will be reserved for times when she is not specifically focused on her job. I'm curious to know where Rose's specific career aspiration comes from – "...After completing an NHS professional awareness survey at school", Rose explains, "my top response was for a paediatrician". I am impressed by Rose's confidence, but the weight and impact of this questionnaire on her Aspiration soon perturbs

me. Later, I reflect. When a young person fills out let's say ~50 questions from a reputable organisation and they are told they have the top attributes to be the job they aspire to be, then how does this positively or negatively translate into their formation of their HE aspiration. More unnerving though, what happens when said questionnaire, omits a given career from its top five suggestions, implying that the young person does not have the attributes for a particular path - what next? Where did Rose's initial career aspiration, at the start of the research project, "to be a pilot because she wants to travel the world" disappear to.

5.2.8   Eric

Eric, from a large extended family, exudes confidence and charisma. Positively subverting gendered and racialised stereotypes as black and male, Eric is eager to participate in lessons and is always one of the first to complete his work, closely but quietly followed by Samuel. Whether his Year 8 peers would admit it or not, they almost always wait for his endorsement or response before agreeing to participate or actively engage in activities; they glance his way almost in chorus, whilst looks of "What would Eric do?" fall across their faces. He may cower over his peers with his tall stature but he is friendly and approachable; to his peers, Eric is "good at leading and listening to others". Ever the model student, when asked about the qualities he possesses that he thinks will continue to be useful in his future, Eric recites Amberley Grove's five-quality acronym. The mantra that Amberley Grove have painstakingly interwoven into the School's policies and media output – qualities which are an expectation for both staff, prospective and existing, and students alike. The mantra is also used repeated throughout the Principal's new academic year presentation to staff, and subsequently to pupils. Ironically however Eric, confidently states that he "only [shows] three of the five qualities". "Working" is where Eric sees himself in ten years' time, "I'm not sure what to do [as a job] – I have two ideas – I will make plans and then choose between them" he concedes "...maybe something music or football related". Like Sophia, Music is Eric's professed love. His father and brother are his examples and are important in his thoughts about his future because "They used to be music producers, Miss." he adds proudly.

However, one research encounter gave me the opportunity to see Eric in a new light. It was during a discussion about Higher Education, that quickly turned, as it often did, to talk of GCSE subject choices. For context, at Amberley Grove, they adopt what they term, a five-year

curriculum, and unlike in many English schools, GCSE subject choices are confirmed by the end of Year 8. Speaking as a Year 8 in the early part of the Spring Term, Eric announces, "Now that I've chosen my GCSE subject options, I'm not really interested in the others anymore – why can't I just drop those subjects already?". Completion of "Triple Science" qualification was highly encouraged by Amberley Grove staff and students, for those deemed academically-able – Nevertheless, Eric remains resolute.

5.2.9   Jada

"How old will I be in ten years?" she considers out loud when asked where she sees herself at that time, "...I want to be a surgeon Miss, so still at university then, definitely somewhere in the UK, but I'll have a part-time job". Jada continues "I'd like to work in the NHS ... maybe in Birmingham, London, Wales or Huddersfield"; she has been to those places before, she has family there. She continues "...I don't really know anyone in my family who's a surgeon, I just watch things like Casualty and Holby City, but my cousin's a pharmacist." Like Rita, she has a myriad of activities outside of school, shopping, visiting her Aunt's family, she has private tuition, she goes to the Mosque and reads "the Qur'an and other books too". She'd "like to go on holiday to Turkey and... maybe Morocco". Her big events in life include two family births, a wedding, finishing the Quran and "Moving house, to a nicer area..." Family and religion are important to Jada.

When asked what qualities, she has that she thinks will be useful in the future, Jada pauses for a moment and then almost as if a bulb had turned on above her head, she responds. "well the [school acronym] skills Miss... being a leader," she opens her palm and points to her fingers counting, "communication, organisation... resilience and... ermm... initiative". Jada is noticeably impressed with herself for identifying this as a response. I did explain to Jada, in the group and individually at the beginning of the activity, that there were no incorrect answers and that I was interested in their knowledge. Nevertheless, Jada was satisfied with her answer. She smirked at me and appeared chuffed at having almost outwit me; I was slightly frustrated at her prescribed answer but conceded by noting it down. Jada was pleased to produce the formulaic answer that she felt addressed the question in its entirety. For Jada, it appears that school rhetoric is the gold standard and she even implied that "by adopting the skills of [school acronym]", she will be successful. By responding to me in this way, Jada answered this question

about her future in a manner she deemed institutionally acceptable and fitting for the researcher-respondent dyad; despite being twelve years old, Jada was on message.

5.2.10 Jamie

At the start of the research project, Jamie is quite outgoing and forthcoming, but this doesn't last until the end. By the time Jamie is in Year 8, she is noticeably quiet. Jamie was normally one of the first to raise her hand to answer questions; her hand would shoot up alongside Rita's and Eric's. But as time went on, Jamie was less likely to answer questions, less likely to raise her hand first and generally unlikely to arrive early for lessons and research activities. Whereas in the early months, she was attentive, sat at the front in classes and her pencil case was bulging full of pens and stationery, later in the project, Jamie becomes somewhat preoccupied in the classroom, often staring out the window or through the glass in the door.

Nevertheless, Jamie remains confident to share her unique opinions on her Aspirations and value of education, including on "Who is Successful?". "The Bronte Sisters" and the "Suffragettes", she scribbles on the sheet during a specific research activity. "Who are they?" one Year 8 cries. "The Suffrawhats" blurts someone else. That these figures are unheard of by the other Year 8s and left-field based on the list, does not phase Jamie. She is quite content to offer insights to who she considers successful; some of which set her thinking apart from the other young people. "I've always preferred animals to people!", Jamie states. I laugh empathetically, understanding her sentiment. Jamie has a passion for animals and would like to become a "world famous vet" in the future, which later morphed into an Aspiration to be a zoologist. She doesn't know anyone personally who does the profession but like Jada has been interested by the career from well-known TV programmes: David Attenborough's programmes to be precise. A year earlier, Jamie wanted to be a chef. As diverse as this careers may appear, Jamie's Aspiration displays one particular pattern. Like many of her peers, her Aspirations for the future reflect and are aligned with her passions and joys in her present – her "dog, budgies and animals".

Jamie is sceptical of the purpose of school. She lists many expectations of what she "thinks school should be for..."; that is "...changing the way people think of the world... inspiring the new generation to reach for the stars and tell them that they can be exactly what they want".

According to Jamie, should is an "order", unlike would and could, which indicate definite and indefinite states respectively. She explains that she is uncertain whether school is living up to expectations of what it should be. Her goal is to "do really well in GCSEs, go to a "good" university, access "good" courses and achieve "good" grades". Jamie raises two fingers on each hand to the sides of her head each time she says good, implying that she was yet to establish what good constituted. Unlike Jamie's hesitance of what is good, one thing Jamie was certain of, was that wherever she planned to be in the future, it would be "near home". She has travelled abroad before, even without her parents, but Jamie explains that maintaining a link with her parents "close to home" is particularly important for her.

5.2.11 Sophia

"Confident to speak her mind" and with proven "leadership skills", Sophia was always playing devil's advocate in discussions. For the sake of debate, which she often cleverly steered, Sophia shared new ideas and was always keen to divide the debate with controversial propositions. She was even willing to propose a view contrary to her own, in a bid to challenge her classmates to examine their own preconceptions. It was from Sophia that I found out how the group of Year 9s came to be. "...So we're mostly one big friendship group... us four girls all went to the same primary school", she explains, pointing to Marianne, Amanda and Mya. Sophia is intelligent and strong-minded with Aspiration to match. Her career and future family plans are clear and consistent: "a biomedical scientist married with two kids [with distinctive names already assigned], a husband and a car"; as easy as that. Interestingly, Sophia is the only young person to detail life beyond her years. At "70", she will "retire with husband" and "100" will see her "die successful in field [of work], as a wife and mother". Aspiration as a mother and wife is very important to Sophia's future. In pretty much every exploration of the future, Sophia was quick to emphasise her future relationship status. Unlike her peers, who almost invariably express having a faith but do not consider their faith in depth in their future plans, Sophia's faith is important to how she imagines her future. As with most things, she is confident to share that fact. She often reflects on whether her future is "...what [she's] supposed to do and if it's what god wants of [her]..."

When Sophia stated that she had chosen not to complete the Triple Science qualification, others looked round aghast – Mya burst "I tried to say I was thinking to do something else like

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Music instead… the teachers said no do Triple Science… we…" turning to point at both herself and Amanda, "still get to Music, but still!" Both girls had in fact been able to participate in multiple Music-related extra-curricular activities despite not taking the GCSE subject. That they were given somewhat special treatment was, according to Adam, "… just because your mum's a teacher!" Amanda explained that they "all" felt pressured to take "Triple Science" subjects because these were supposedly favoured by universities at the expense of more traditional creative subjects, which they very much enjoyed, such as Music and/or Art but that were not available in the relevant stream. "Miss, if I want to do science at A-level, Uni, Job […or insert other equivalent education/career trajectory that is the right choice] ?I must do Triple Science", Amanda remarked. The Year 9 pupils nodded in agreement.

Sophia is happy to take centre stage. Not only is she confident in Performing Arts, she doesn't hesitate to lead in the absence of an assertive authority figure. In one lesson - a cover lesson – I enter to Sophia writing the lesson instructions on the board. The other pupils in the class start to question her about the instructions and suggest that the instruction sheet is incomplete. In the teacher's absence, Sophia proceeds to provide the class with further support on how to complete the activity. To settle the nerves of her peers, she sets about to email their absent teacher "straight away". This is to confirm the additional queries from the class; as there does in fact appear to be information missing from the sheet. With Sophia's penchant for leadership, it is no surprise that she, like Amanda, holds two school captain positions. One is as Music captain - the subject she is particularly passionate about, and refused to participate in Triple Science for.

5.2.12 Dylan

Dylan "always has the correct answer" but I observe many a lesson where he is quiet and reserved. One Triple Science lesson, the teacher asks a question and asks for someone to answer. One of the pupils in the class answer and then he asks "Who wants to stick up for [the pupil]? Adam, will you stick up for [the pupil]?" "... Aww", the teacher sighs as Adam refuses. He asks Dylan and 10 members of the class raise their hands in agreement to Dylan's answer, which was correct. Dylan, with a brief smile towards the class, places his head back down to look at his book. Over the course of the lesson, the teacher explains more of the concepts. The

pupils ask more questions. He explains, "When I was at university, we had electron microscopes but they are very expensive." Tyler and Moe look up intrigued. Dylan continues his work undeterred. The class discussion continues with Marianne asking, "Is there anything smaller than an atom?", to which Dylan raises his head slightly and replies nonchalantly, "A quark". The pupils all turn to Dylan appearing surprised that he replied. Marianne then asks "Sir, is he right?". "Yes he is, it is a quark", replies the teacher. But Dylan's one-off, correct answers don't appear to get all of the positive credit one would assume, as teachers often remark that he should "speak up more if you know the correct answer".

Dylan overall hadn't said much in the research activities either; he arrived, completed the written activities and left. However, one day he arrives early to a research activity. Having noted his introversion, but not wishing to add to it by pointing it out, I seize this uniquely quiet opportunity to find out more about Dylan, his education and his plans. To my surprise, in the quieter room, Dylan is forthcoming with his experience. Unlike the other participants, Dylan was born outside of the UK and lived in two other cities in the UK before settling in Birmingham, six months before starting secondary school. He explains that he wished he didn't move to Birmingham because he doesn't "really like it that much but school is okay".

From this point forward, Dylan continues to share his opinion in the research activities forcefully. He dreams that he will "Get a degree and get a dream job either an Author, a Computer scientist, or a Graphics Artist". Whilst Moving house and starting fresh are consistent themes amongst Dylan's big past events, only Money is in his future, and by 22, he will "Become a cryptocurrency millionaire". Whereas before he would sit on the fringes of the room to participate in the activities, Dylan appears to be growing in confidence within the activities and does not hesitate to offer insights, he is a GCSE Drama student after all. Not to be outgunned by his peers, in an activity exploring the purpose of education, he offers the most detailed response of all the young people. He states:

"School is for preparing us for the future.

Education is great - it teaches you things and knowledge is power.

However, Education should be tailored to the person that is being educated.

If we are based on a grade we get after 13 years of education that you have to go through,

what is the point of being human? Chicken eggs are also based on grades - are we chicken eggs?"

5.2.13 Taylor

Taylor, Mya, Adam and Amanda were chosen to participate in a two-year university outreach programme. I jump at the chance to be granted access to observe the participants outside of school at this event. It's Saturday - the day arrives to attend my first of two full day events on the university campus and I am excited. The format is clear – parents (or accompanying adult) and pupils listen in a lecture hall, parents and pupils separate for relevant activities, parents and pupils reunite for a debrief of the day. The Amberley Grove pupils arrive and sit together; that is as close as a group of boys and girls of that age in a large full room sit who know each other and no one else in the room besides their parents. All day, Taylor is noticeably quiet. Monday morning, I ask Taylor how he found the day, he shrugs. "My brother dropped me, my parents were at work so they couldn't come for the day... and it's far to come, my brother said it's in the middle of nowhere..." Taylor decided not to come to the next event. Talking to him back at school he confirms, "What's the point of it, Miss? ... nah I just don't think it's for me" he says.

An early morning Biology lesson offered a unique insight into the group and their ideas about moral medical issues. The lesson was about statins – the controversial medicine used in the treatment of heart disease. Present, as with most "Triple Science" lessons, are Adam, Dylan, Kyle, Marianne, Amanda, Mya, Jessica and Taylor. The pupils are asked to engage in a debate around the advantages and disadvantages of utilising the treatment. The table with Mya, Taylor and the other pupils on their table soon descends into an intense medical debate around the "...quality of life over quantity..."

Aside from one table, the other four tables in the room appear to each be engaged in quite animated discussions around the subject. Taylor stares up at the ceiling for a few moments, somewhat aloof. He then utters in open discussion, "I want to be a surgeon!" The discussion on his table quickly dies down but no-one remarks on his revelation. Interrupting what has suddenly become an awkward two second silence, Taylor looking slightly embarrassed turns to his peers cancels his previous statement by stating, "...Actually nah... [forget] that! I can't!"

Aspirations are often fleeting; sometimes if you even blink you'll miss them. Is this a pre-emptive self-exclusion by Taylor? GCSEs, driving, sixth form, university and marriage all feature on a time line in Taylor's consideration of the future and as big events in his amazing life; but his dream for the future, in his words, remains "Undecided". Like his Year 9 peers attending the off-site university event, the world is his oyster but decisions on Aspiration are not forthcoming.

Reflecting on the initial discussion that spurred Taylor's utterances and those of his peers, one of the research activities explored the question of "Which big world problems would you like to solve?"

5.2.14 Adam

"He's confident and even though he doesn't enjoy some of the activities here, he can explain himself very well so he doesn't mind coming… You know Adam Miss, well he's just loud and likes to debate…" Amanda and Mya glance at each other briefly before continuing. They burst in unison, chuckling to themselves, "…Obviously, we do too, like debating but – but he's just on another level!" The boys from Amberley Grove are yet to arrive at the university event but the girls are quick to enlighten me on Adam and Taylor's perceptions of the event. Taylor no longer wishes to participate as he isn't enjoying it, but they explain that unlike Taylor, Adam is very confident so he is still willing to attend. Adam can verbally articulate himself like no other pupil in the group; he is definitely not backwards in coming forward. In one activity at the university outreach event, when asked to act out a place he would like to visit, of the group, he is the first to choose: Mexico. As always, he begins an animated, entertaining display.

A senior member of staff made a comment at the beginning of the academic year regarding why students become "Bored". Those students who are at the top of the class often feel unchallenged, distracted and disengaged when the lesson isn't pitched appropriately. This appears true of some of the young people in the research in different ways, but for Adam, this was most clear in real-time. He was always quick to answer questions, in lesson, in research, and at off-campus activities, generally everywhere. But with this comes his speedy banter when he is disengaged, or vocal self-criticism where he doesn't display perfection in all areas. One early morning lesson, having waited for a few minutes to for peers to all arrive, Adam's

teacher finally instructs the class to be seated. He is more talkative in this lesson compared to the other pupils and sits at the front, right opposite the teacher's desk. Once the teacher shares the plan for the lesson, Adam shares his own opinion of the lesson; "Feels like we've been here before... Feels like we had this lesson an hour ago". Nevertheless, in true Adam-style, he is the first to volunteer to read from the lesson text. The teacher seems somewhat oblivious to Adam's earlier comments, proceeding to complement him, "You're good Adam, well you're always good". He reads, mostly fluently, until a certain where he gets slightly nervous and stumbles. He takes a moment to exclaim "What the hell man!", at which point the teacher, noticing Adam's frustration invites the second volunteer to read... Amanda.

All the young people were invited to illustrate eight big events in their life – past, present and future, whichever events felt most relevant and significant. Adam's big events start at 11 and aside from a competition win and driving at 17, all of Adam's big event in the past, present and future involve Education. Grades are important to Adam and he lists his attainments and his predictions. Nevertheless, Adam is always quick to throw curveballs, and whilst his big events are mostly academic, his dream for the future is unrelated to education, career and training: he dreams of "Sky-diving"!

5.2.15 Kyle

Like Adam, Kyle's future starts at 11, when he "left primary". Ultimately, in Kyle's consideration of his amazing life, the future is the dominant theme. This is clear from the beginning of the research project, when Kyle writes that he would like to leave education at "24 if [he] could because [he] would have a good future, get married and have kids". Many months after the first research activity, almost as if he has a script, Kyle reiterates his unwavering plan for his future - at sixteen he will do his GCSEs, by 17 he'll be driving, then "sixth form, uni and a job", at 18, 20 and 24 – all in that order. Oh and Kyle will "Marry" although "IDK (aka I don't know) Who", he adds. Unlike some of the other young people, who either remain undeclared or others who are indecisive in relation to their future, Kyle is decisive and consistent from start to end. "In the future I know I will be a great architech because I know that I will study hard" Kyle states. Kyle's concise articulation of the future extends beyond his own experience, to his explanation of the difference between would, should and could, and shows awareness far beyond his years. For Kyle, the differences are simply "Would is what you want to do, should

is the responsible and good way and could is a possibility". So, Kyle says whilst his "friends say [he] could become an athlete", he has told his "family, teachers, and friends... he wants to be an architect".

5.2.16 Summary

Overall, the vignettes have explored aspects of these young people's HE aspiration as defined earlier in the thesis in section 2.3.4. The aspects included their goal-oriented plans for the future, their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities, including their prior and current attainment as well as their cultural identities. It was unclear from the literature review if and how these aspects of HE aspiration were discussed by the "most-able, least-likely" young people. By analysing and presenting the data through thick description, I considered how young people may situate their future educational aspirations within these wider identities. In this section, by detailing the discussions and observations of HE aspirations in vignettes across timepoints within the fieldwork, I also explored how young people's HE aspirations change over time and in discussion with their classmates and their school. This suggests that young people often undergo evolving processes of (re-)articulation of their HE aspiration. However, this section only considers some of the aspects of HE aspiration. The following section explores other aspects of the conceptualisation of HE aspiration with the young people, as researched in Amberley Grove.

5.3   Reconsidering HE aspiration

This second section of the findings explores additional factors of HE aspiration and how it was formed by these young people in their school. It is divided into three further subsections. The first subsection presents findings related to aspects of the wider conceptualisation of HE aspiration, as indicated in the conceptual framework. The data for these findings were drawn from observations of the young people and the school site as well as group discussions with them. I consider how HE aspiration is formed by young people as five subtopics.

Then, I present the findings of one of the main research activities, in which the young people created a poster (see Appendix 6) detailing the big events in their lives. I conducted a thematic

analysis of the posters produced by the 16 young people, to identify key themes of the important points in their pasts, presents and futures. The posters indicated the importance that university played in different young people's considerations of the future and their HE aspirations. The final subsection presents findings on group discussions exploring the role of education. I used thematic analysis to collate the young people's knowledge of the value of education to consider the themes that different young people discussed in relation to their educational identity and agency.

5.3.1   Aspects of HE aspiration

During the course of the fieldwork, young people participated in observations, interactive activities and group discussions around HE aspiration. References to HE aspiration were sporadic and intermittent in the young people's daily interactions. However, where the opportunities to explore HE aspiration occurred in activities, overall, the young people talked at greater length about aspiration but mainly in relation to other concepts of their futures. These have been divided into six sub topics drawn from the conceptualisation of HE aspiration presented in the conceptual framework. These subtopics are goal-driven plans for the future; knowledge of HE; self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept; cultural expectations and identities; past, present, future educational and career identities and navigating priorities and hierarchies of school stakeholders. The subtopics are discussed below, drawing on ethnographic thick description from observations, group discussions and interactive activities to present the findings.

5.3.1.1   goal-driven plans for the future

Even seemingly fixed and conclusive aspiration, including to HE, can change. Disinclinations can occur quickly, or over time, through (non-)comments from peers, by recommendations from school media and family, or driven by alternative interests. Examples of changes in or wavering aspiration can be found in many young people's vignettes such as Rita's, Samuel's and Taylor's.

Through my observations of the young people, I recognised that most, if not all, were big YouTube fans. I crafted a group discussion around the value of education involving a popular YouTube video, with at the time around 17million views. It began by me playing the video

entitled "I SUED THE SCHOOL SYSTEM!" by Prince Ea. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqTTojTija8 . It is quite a provocative video in which the narrator, entitled the "accuser", argues that the school system was unfit to educate modern young people. The video is shot in a North American-style courtroom and involved pupils of many generations. After the 6-minute video, I asked the young people in two separate Year 8 and Year 9 groups, "What is education for?" and "What would you change if you could?".

The young people were amazed by the ideas shared in the video and it helped to stimulate an interesting discussion about whether education and school were synonymous. The young people asked whether I was asking ""What is education for?" or whether education could be exchanged for school. This appeared to be a recurring area of ambiguity in the research. For example, distinguishing school from education, careers from jobs, and adulthood at 22 from adulthood at 50, proved increasingly difficult. For most of the participants, these terms were used interchangeably. I reserved that choice for the young people. Some felt that education was not synonymous with school, whilst others chose not to articulate a specific definition between the two. I grouped the young people's responses under the headers of "What is education for?" and "What would you change if you could?". Using thematic analysis, I identified key themes from the responses of the young people.

When asking the young people "What is education for?" the responses were themed around the following: Preparation for the future, Jobs, Inspiring new ways of thinking, Social Engineering, Knowledge and skills, Education is not School, Not fit for purpose. Table 5 is outlined below indicating the young people's responses.

Table 5 - Discussing What is education for?

	What is education for?						
	Question Themes						
							Not fit for purpose
YP Name	Prepare for the future	To get Jobs	Inspiring new ways of thinking	Social Engineering	Knowledge and skills	Education is not School	
Dylan	X				X		
Amanda					X	X	
Adam		X			X		
Taylor	X				X		
Kyle	X	X					
Gabby	X		X		X		
Jessica	X			X			
Mya					X	X	
Sophia	X						X
Marianne	X						
Rita	X	X			X		
Rose							X
Jamie							X
Jada	X	X					
Samuel							X
Eric	X	X		X			

For many of the young people, school was for preparing for the future. Often, failure in school was viewed as detrimental to their future, and inversely, success in school is positive for their future. To bolster success and minimise academic failure, some parents, like Jessica's were willing to pay for additional tuition.

Following on from the discussions exploring what education is for, I asked the young people to consider "What would you change if you could?" Changes around increasing collaboration, subject and extracurricular opportunities, whilst reducing stress levels and testing, were suggestions popular amongst the pupils.

Table 6 - Discussing What they would change about education?

| | What would you change if you could? | | | | | | | | | | No change suggested |
| | Question Themes | | | | | | | | | | |
	Stress levels	More Subject and Extra-curricular Opportunities	More Collaboration	Teacher pay rise	Reduced testing	Less homework	Education catered to technological development and the future	Person-centred	Education that doesn't judge	Freedom of choice and expression	
Dylan								X	X		
Amanda					X						
Adam											X
Taylor											X
Kyle								X			
Gabby										X	
Jessica											X
Mya					X						
Sophia									X		
Marianne											X
Rita	X	X	X	X	X						
Rose	X	X			X	X	X				
Jamie							X			X	
Jada	X	X	X								
Samuel			X		X		X				
Eric		X								X	

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Unlike the other pupils, Amanda and Mya gave the same answers throughout the research activity. Amongst the pupils, those offering suggestions for change to education outnumbered those who did not, three to one. The written suggestions for change by relieving pressure and stress levels were overwhelmingly from the Year 8 pupils. At first glance, this would suggest that concerns about stress, workload and widening academic and extra-curricular opportunities were not relevant to the Year 9 pupils. That the Year 9 pupils did not feel it justified to offer too many written suggestions for change may suggest a reconciliation with education as "important… because it gives you the necessary skills and knowledge to get you through life and gives you the opportunity". However, the Year 9 pupils held an extensive debate amongst themselves whilst completing this activity about pressure, despite not writing any of those notes down. This may suggest that for these Year 8 pupils, stress and workload pressures may be individualised and rarely discussed, whilst for these Year 9 pupils, pressure is a factor affecting the group, and a discussion point of shared commonality. Dylan, like his peers, Sophia and Kyle, suggests that education should not judge individuals and instead should be person-centred. The suggestion of "More Subject and Extracurricular Opportunities" links Jada, Eric, Rita and Rose – all in Year 8. The only suggestion themes that link the Year group pupils are suggestions that education should offer "Freedom of choice and expression" and should also "Reduce Testing". Beyond those suggestions for change the young people remained starkly divided on changes to education.

One discussion the Year 8 pupils did instigate, was around an idea proposed in the video by Prince Ea - the accusation in the video that teachers were underpaid. The video explored the idea that given teachers' role as educators, they were underappreciated as social influencers. This led the Year 8 pupils to discuss whether they felt that teachers should be paid less than, the same as, or more than doctors, from what they had watched and heard. They discussed themes around the value of teachers and whether influence should equate to financial value. From this discussion, two students, Taylor and Kyle, felt that current relative wages were acceptable, most felt that they should be paid the same and some of the pupils, such as Dylan and Sophia, felt that they should be paid more. However, when asked about what they would change in education, only Rita felt that a teacher pay rise was a change worth writing. The

teaching profession is important to Rita, who for most of the research had aspired to be "a head teacher". Interestingly Rita is also the only young person to provide a suggestion distinct from the other suggestions for change to education.

A general theme within this research activity was that "Education is to prepare you for your future", and can provide knowledge and skills to the young people. However, Jessica, Eric, Sophia, Rose, Jamie and Samuel were less complimentary about the role of education, suggesting it was designed to socially engineer and was not fit for purpose. Table 5 shows the pupils' responses to the role of education. As in much of the research, Amanda and Mya expressed the same responses in their knowledge of HE aspiration. They decide that whilst education is to develop knowledge and skills, they feel it is important to affirm that education is not equivalent to school and there are other places to be educated. Taylor and Dylan share similar views on the purpose of education.

A key theme amongst the young people was that education serves to develop knowledge and skills, with Taylor, Rita, Dylan, Adam and Gabby also putting this as a main purpose of education. Alongside the importance of knowledge and skills for the groups, were considerations of education as a means to secure a job and to prepare you for the future. The Year 9 pupils all ascribe to at least one of these three concepts as a purpose of education. However, Rita, Jada and Eric are the only three Year 8 pupils to consider these factors in the role of education. All three resolve that education is a means towards the future and for job plans, with Rita also acknowledging its role in developing one's knowledge and skills. That said, Eric and Jessica seem slightly cynical of the role of education and highlight its role in social engineering. Ironically, Gabby appears to be the only person to discuss a theme largely distinct from the rest, that education is for "Inspiring new ways of thinking". Those who felt that education was not fit for purpose were overwhelmingly in Year 8, with only one Year 9 pupil, Sophia, suggesting that education was not fit for purpose. Interestingly, this was reflected in the concentration of pupils who did not write a suggestion for any change to education.

For some young people, once their pathway to their future is set, they disregard anything else that they deem irrelevant to achieving that goal. They disregard any value in short-term success in supposed irrelevant subjects; they no longer matter. They decide they do not need

to learn the subject as they won't be studying it in the future. Arguably, education, for Eric, is functional, with learning only necessary when it is determined as useful. Others, like Gabby, dismiss the value of other activities as uninteresting and irrelevant to their career pathway. As well as some of the young people disregarding current and future opportunities, underachievement is another factor that appears to shape aspiration. Jessica is very worried that she will "fail" and that this will have ramifications for her future. She also expresses that her parents feel that additional tuition may be a solution to raise her current attainment. Jessica outlines the irony; "I already don't like school... Honestly, like what's the point of going to more school outside school!" Jessica's underachievement is clearly shaping her knowledge of the future and her self- confidence. For Jessica, her attainment in the present, has her nervous about the future and, for her, these are directly linked. Her apprehensions are intertwined with her educational aspiration.

5.3.1.2   knowledge of HE

Throughout the research, I was keen to explore how the young people's knowledge of HE and the process of becoming an HE student, shaped the ongoing formation of their aspirations to it. To explore this, I detail the findings of a research task for the young people. They were invited to create a university student applicant profile. They chose a partner and worked in pairs to create a profile of an "ideal" university applicant; a name, age, university choice, degree subject, favourite subject, hobbies, and background information of a potential university applicant. This would form the basis of creating and exploring a university applicant profile. The pairs consisted of: Amanda and Mya, Jada and Rose, Eric and Samuel, Adam and Taylor, Jamie and Rita, Marianne and Sophia, Jessica and Gabby, Dylan and Kyle. In the following account, I use thick description to present how the young people discuss their knowledge of university application and progression, and what information they may reference to underpin their decision-making.

Some pairs set right to creating the profile, whilst others were slightly more hesitant at putting pen to paper. Interestingly, none of the young people questioned the proposition of the "Ideal" applicant. When I asked, what is the ideal applicant, everyone set about either considering and/or detailing this individual, no-one questioned the very premise of the question. Sophia

and Marianne engaged in a very animated conversation on one side of the room. It began with Sophia positioning the ideal applicant as her future children, naming the applicants after her chosen future children's names. All the pairs spent around four minutes deciding on a name for their applicant, with Eric even proposing "Jeffery Harvard", with, following his outcry, the idea of applying to Harvard immediately poached by Jada and Rose. All the "ideal" applicants' ages varied between 18-20. Marianne and Sophia, in particular, spend around one minute deliberating over the age of their university applicant. "Miss!" Marianne calls, "Is it above 18 that you go to university?" I explained that that only very few individuals go before 18.

In other parts of the room, there are other discussions about the "ideal" university destinations of the potential applicant. "Let's go Oxford next!" Eric suggests to Samuel. "Yeah, Oxford", Samuel agrees and they scurry to add the institution to the list. Gabby and Jessica are also a bit stumped about what institutions to write "Just write anything down!" Jessica blurts, "I'm tryna think of other universities", Gabby replies. Taylor also shared that he was struggling to recall other HE institutions – "I'm trying to think of other universities, right now I've got Cambridge and Oxford." He pauses for a moment and scrolls on his phone, "University College London!" he states and looks back at his paper to scribble this new idea down. All but one of the pairs referenced both Oxford and Cambridge in the potential applications; the pair who did not, referenced universities outside of the UK. The university I attend, Warwick, was the second most popular application choice for the participants' university applicant profiles. All the Yr9 participants attending the WP opportunity that I observed, chose this university as a choice for their applicant's profile, amongst other pairs. It is unclear to what extent this institution being the second most popular application choice, is related to familiarity, it being referenced by other students, me being a student from the institution, the existing active institutional relationship of their school, the young people's engagement, experience with, or perception of the institution or any other factor such as location and proximity or prestige.

Nearby, the discussion has moved on to degree subjects. Two of the Year 8 pairs are discussing subject choice: "Computing, nah Computing… Do something like computing fam!" Eric insists. Eric and Samuel decide that Computing will be the degree of choice for their "ideal" applicant. Despite Eric's outbursts, Medicine is the degree course for Jada and Rose's "ideal" applicant.

Kyle and Dylan are considering the degree structure; they wait patiently to have their question answered. Kyle quizzes me, "What about Miss, you know when like you go to a place for 9 months and… well what's that called?" I think for a moment suggesting an Erasmus exchange, but Kyle's blank look quickly indicates that this isn't the thing he is querying. I ask for clarification, "Do you mean go to another country or to stay within the country or city to work… it's sometimes referred to as a sandwich year and you can complete 3 placements over 9 months or stay in 1 place like you said, learning about how to do the job".

After a few moments, the muffled tones are broken by Sophia calling across the room to Taylor. She has found a university that shares his surname. Taylor smiles and looks back down at his paper. After a couple of minutes, and further discussion between Sophia and Marianne, Taylor laughs and points at them both "You are going to ruin your child!" he exclaims. Sophia chuckles and lifts her head, "What do you mean?" she replies. "Looking for all these universities that have funny names." Sophia is not flustered, "How is Hanoi… Hanoi university… Hanoi university of science and technology a weird name? I'm not sending my child to [Taylor's surname] university", "I thought you were" Taylor smiles. "No! And the University of Delhi doesn't even sound that bad" continues Sophia.

Nine institutions selected were outside the UK; two of which, Harvard and Yale, had three potential application votes each. Besides those five institutions, the other 17 institutions were chosen only once each, including four local institutions (within 15 miles). Some pairs offered a consistent connection between subject, university choice, location and directly-related career pathway. More often though, degree subject choices were broad, with hobbies and languages spoken unconnected to degree choices.

Sitting next to each other, Marianne and Sophia, Jamie and Rita are the only pairs to suggest university destinations outside of the UK and the USA. With Sophia proclaiming that her applicant "…wants to go to uni in a country where her family's from" and Canada having a specific personal connection for Rita, it is interesting to note that the University of Toronto features in Jamie and Rita's list. Whilst, neither Rita nor Jamie, make such a specific statement, they do listen and watch Marianne at various points throughout the activity. It is possible that

even though each pair expresses this in various ways, cultural connections and ancestral heritage play an important role in young people's "ideal" university destination. , How this expression translates into the reality of HE participation is outside the scope of this research, but may present interesting avenues for future research. It may also be important to note that Marianne and Sophia are the only pair to vocally and specifically state cultural and ancestral importance in their "ideal" applicant's university choice; this is alongside being the only pair not to indicate Oxford and Cambridge as university destinations for their applicant.

Gabby and Jessica, Dylan and Kyle are sat near to each other. They are the only pairs to indicate preferences for uniquely-chosen universities within their local region: The West Midlands. They both suggest applicants could apply to two institutions each; Wolverhampton and Birmingham for Gabby and Jessica's "ideal" applicant; Dylan and Kyle propose Aston University and Birmingham City University. Further similarities can be seen between other closely-seated pairs; Adam and Taylor, Amanda and Mya propose university applications to universities in London, whilst Rose and Jada, Eric and Samuel have almost identical university destinations, each suggesting Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Warwick. They are only separated by their fifth choices for their "ideal" applicant: Yale and York, respectively. That is not to suggest that seating proximity is directly indicative of the information young people discuss about the "ideal" applicant. However, it does suggest that those with similar affinities may sit close together, or vice versa and that there is limited variation amongst the young people about the profile of the "ideal" applicant. Table 7 outlines the subject and location of the ideal HE applicant chosen by each pair of young people:

Table 7 - The University Application Destination of the pairs' "ideal" applicant profile

		Amanda and Mya (9)	Jada and Rose (8)	Eric and Samuel (8)	Adam and Taylor (9)	Jamie and Rita (8)	Marianne and Sophia (9)	Jessica and Gabby (9)	Dylan and Kyle (9)
		Medicine	Medicine	Computing	Physics	Primary Education	Biomedical science and neuroscience	Gaming, Coding & ICT	Audiology
University Application Ch	Oxford	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
	Warwick	X	X	X	X				
	Cambridge	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
	LSE	X							
	Cardiff	X							
	York			X					
	UCL					X			
	Imperial					X			
	Wolverhampton							X	
	Aston								X
	Birmingham							X	
	Edinburgh							X	
	Birmingham City Univer								X
	Caltec					X			
	National University of Singapore					X			
	University of Toronto					X			
	Hanoi university of scie and technology						X		
	The University of West Indies, Mona						X		
	University of Deli						X		
	Marie curie university						X		
	Harvard		X	X					X
	Yale		X				X		X

Intertwined with the young people's knowledge of HE in their conceptualisation of HE aspiration is knowledge of their past, current and future plans for their career and educational identities. How they see their academic potential and whether they feel it, for example inhibited and stunted, or evolving and fulfilled, may impact how they envisage their plans to enter HE. I found in group discussions that some young people were keen to dominate conversations about post-compulsory education pathways and that careers guidance of the school was often misaligned and inconsistent with educational pathways of the pupils, as well as rarely independent.

To begin, in considering post-18 opportunities, the young people took part in a group discussion, in which I, the researcher, posed the question "Should I go to work or university at 18?" The discussion was aimed at encouraging the young people to consider how educational and vocational decision-making may be juxtaposed and explore how and who may wish to propose individual, alongside group, decisions to the wider young people about whether work or university was the most worthwhile direction at 18. Work at 18 was considered the most financially stable direction, and was the first point made by both groups in favour of the full-time work route. Sophia, Taylor, Adam and Eric eventually dominated the discussion, with most of the others struggling to get a word in edgeways. They had contrasting arguments – Sophia and Eric suggested that there didn't need to be a decision between the work and "uni", and proposed that the young people could choose a trajectory that incorporated the two by working and studying part-time. The notion of a sandwich university course at familiar local institutions was suggested as well as debated. For a short time, the group discussion descended into a back and forth debate between Sophia and Taylor. I felt it necessary to redirect the conversation and enable others to contribute.

Both groups felt that "Experience" was essential and a positive attribute for a full-time work trajectory. It cost "lots of money to go to university" and they "may not be able to pay for uni", and as such, work at 18 was a sensible option. Work for some offered "something to fall back on". Creating group consensus was key to the discussion, often borne out of somewhat intense

negotiation and compromise between the young people. In this case, the consensus was that both work and university could be participated in at 18 concurrently and successfully. Some actively agreed to this notion, others were passive in the debate.

Teachers as Careers Educators

Seeking out career advice and guidance also sometimes proved a challenge for the young people, even with well-meaning and supportive teachers. This may impact the fulfilment and support for particular educational pathways and career directions for the young people and shape their HE aspiration. An example of how these challenges manifested, was discussed in my very first lesson observation at Amberley Grove. It was in Dylan's Science lesson.

I knock the door firmly and wait patiently for an invitation to enter. Through the glass in the classroom door window, I see around 20 year 8 students, a very self-assured and confident Science teacher and Dylan sitting quietly at the back of the class. The pupils gesture to the teacher that there is someone at the door and he promptly opens the door. I explain that I am researching young people's HE Aspiration and ask for permission to observe discretely in the room. The teacher was very accommodating; even strategically batting away questions from some pupils about the reason for my presence. After setting the pupils to their lesson task, with their tablets in tow, the teacher joins me at the back of the classroom to observe and enquire about my research. I ask him about his conversations and considerations with Amberley Grove's young people about their Aspiration to Higher Education. Before coming to Amberley Grove, he explained that he had worked in a very different type of school. A lot of the young people there, he continued, were white and had parents who were doctors, lawyers and the like: anecdotally he felt "…black or white… there wasn't really any difference between their views of success and aspiration than the young people here at [Amberley Grove]". Rather, he felt that conversations around career progression, educational aspiration and plans for the future had been greatly hindered by the dissolution of a centralised, somewhat autonomous and independent, careers service, such as Connexions. He expressed that this in his opinion was a loss and stated that "there has become a mismatch between the skill-set and experiences

of teachers and the aspirations of their students". He continued, "the best teachers are often highly educated and will teach the lowest academic groups or sets… because of their educational experience, usually at top universities… they cannot advocate for, or inform those students about the perfectly legitimate, or more realistically academically-attainable options available".

5.3.1.4   navigating priorities and hierarchies of school stakeholders

During my time in the field, I found that issues of misalignment between staff knowledge and the diversity of educational pathways for the pupils were further confounded by school priorities for educational pathways and staff's preconceptions about career pathways. Staff knowledges and preconceptions about educational priorities and capabilities of the young people seemed to have also minimised the young people's ability to enact their self-agency and self-determination of their HE aspiration. The following section presents insights into classroom interactions with staff around HE aspiration, how the school's junior leadership system promoted pupil hierarchies that included and excluded the "most-able, least-likely" young people, as well as the school's presentation of WP priorities and HE aspiration through on-site school events.

Firstly, a Science teacher who was leading a class I was observing misattributed my role within the classroom and makes multiple references advocating for a career in Engineering for the young people. There were many HE students on the Amberley Grove site daily working as teacher trainees. They attend HE institutions from across the region. I am often asked if I'm a trainee teacher and then usually get an abrupt "Oh" response combined with a blank look, when I say "No, I'm a PhD student". On one occasion, I recall entering the Year 9 Triple Science lesson, which included 8 out of ten on the Year 9 pupils in this research. The triple science Year 9 pupils are in all the same science classes together which make up 30% of their entire lesson time. In this particular lesson, the teacher makes multiple references to engineering as a future career for the pupils, for example, "If you're working as an engineer, like in Maths… you will have your error carried forward if you make a mistake on page 4". After setting the pupils to a

task, he comes over to quiz me further on my role at Amberley Grove. … "Are you at BCU?" he says assuredly. He is interested to confirm I am on the Teaching training programme at Birmingham City University. "No, I'm doing research for my PhD at [my university]", I reply. Despite there actually being teacher trainees from my university working at Amberley Grove, my identity as "PhD" rather than "PGCE" student at my place of study appears inconsistent with his assumption and he swiftly redirects the conversation. "What are you researching?" he asks. "Young people's Aspirations, their networks and their notions of the future… so I'm observing the young people in their lessons as well as doing activities with them to get a sense of who they are in class and in their work … There's about 8 pupils from this lesson in the study", I say. After a slight pause, he proceeds to share an unsolicited compliment about the pupils, "The students in this class speak to each other really well. I'm quite privileged to teach them. If they are misbehaved, I know it's my fault!". I smile and nod awkwardly, thank him for his time and for accommodating me in his lesson and excuse myself.

Just before my efficient exit, I notice there are a few prospectuses and leaflets in a magazine bracket on the wall by the door. The majority are from the University of Birmingham and Aston University, both known nationally for their Engineering affiliations. Maybe it's just the fact that I'm observing a Science lesson but engineering as a degree course and subsequent career trajectory appears to be a hot topic at Amberley Grove and amongst the young people. This is the first time I have encountered a teacher being so forthcoming and complimentary of their pupils and I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic. Since then, I have come to realise that staff often offer unsolicited commendations of the pupils I am working with or give affirming nods, once they are aware of who is participating and what the brief topic is of my study. This encounter indicates that Engineering as a discipline and career pathway may hold an important role in the presentation of HE aspiration and how this was expressed by staff. It also signals the prominent visibility of local HE institutions and HE students to the Amberley Grove presentation of HE aspiration and how staff engage with HE students on the school site.

Amberley Grove's College System

This subsection considers how Amberley Grove's pupil leadership system and hierarchies shape the young people's discussion of HE aspiration. They provide opportunities to some of

the "most-able, least-likely" young people, but potentially exclude others. In addition to considering how staff discuss HE aspiration with the young people, Amberley Grove also had a junior leadership team and college system, who liaised with the senior staff, on behalf of the pupils, as the pupil voice. Drawing on an exchange between some of the Year 9 pupils in a lesson, Amanda randomly exclaimed: "Sir, does similar have one 'M'?"

This exclamation prompts a conversation which quickly descends into a discussion about two of the school colleges being academically superior to the other house in question… All because the student had included an extra 'M' in similar! A pupil then turns to the teacher and says, "Sir you're in our college, you know we're right!" Sensing the mood of the room, their teacher replies, "Don't get me into this, I'm not getting into this… It's not a college thing, it's just science" The college system, like many of Amberley Grove's policies, is woven into the culture and fabric of the school. At Amberley Grove, there are four colleges and they guide everything: from what ties pupils wear and when they have assembly to pupils' and (permanent) staffs' form group and their pastoral support team; even student achievement, attainment and of course competitive sport is measured in college.

The form system at Amberley Grove takes a vertical structure; form groups include pupils in Year 7 to 11. Because of this, even though most of the young people have had many of their subject lessons together since they began Amberley Grove either 2 or 3 years ago, only two pairs happened to be in the same form group. Guess who… none other than… Taylor and Kyle, and Amanda and Marianne, of course! Not quite who you expected I imagine. But that said the college affiliations do generally follow the grain with Amanda, Marianne, Sophia and Mya all being in the same college; Taylor, Adam, Kyle, Eric, Samuel and Rita all being in another; Jessica, Gabby, Rose and Jamie in another; with Dylan and Jada being in the last college. The junior leadership system created a structural hierarchy amongst the "most-able, least-likely" young people, which contributed somewhat to some being positioned as winners within the school extra-curricular lottery, and others less so. Attendance at extensive and relevant extra-curricular activities may be influential in the young people's later trajectory for higher education, indicated by work from Byrom (2009) explored further in the discussion chapter.

Amberley Grove on HE Aspiration

As previously outlined, Amberley Grove is set against a complex educational background. At the time of writing, it was continuing to grapple with its educational attainment, relatively low HE participation, particularly to highly selective institutions, whilst being based in an area with high socio-economic deprivation indicators. One of the ways that Amberley Grove challenged these predispositions is to firmly reinforce the value of Higher Education. They do this by creating a robust profile of HE-affiliated pupil re-enforcers. This is explored below through thick description.

Throughout the school, on notice boards in the main building, there are multiple references to HE. In the school foyer, there are pictures and a list of the most "academically-successful" pupils. This board details what A/A* grades the young people from the previous school year received. Then, in a corridor on an upper level of the school, there are scores of pictures of pupils, their names, A Level grades and the HE destination. Every time a current sixth-form pupil received a university offer from their UCAS application, Amberley Grove would publicise this using their various social media platforms. Around school, there were various notice boards related to HE. Some included details of some staff members' university affiliations in staff profiles, with others detailing degree and career options related to specific subjects. Interestingly, there was a large notice board on one of the stairways detailing opportunities to study Art and Design in conjunction with the University of Oxford.

Despite passing this notice board almost daily, the possibility of studying Art at University had never crossed Jessica's mind - hiding in plain sight or a case of staff's missed opportunity? This suggests that despite the billboards and wall displays being positioned in accessible areas throughout the school, the pupils are not utilising them and there is limited space within school to actively discuss these in relation to their HE aspiration. The reasons for this are presumably many, for example, lingering in the halls is a privilege, reserved only for sixth formers during lunchtimes, and even then, it is still frowned upon. The young people in this research did not reference the board nor was the display placed in a space that made it easy to engage with. In order to maximise the impact of the resources Amberley Grove do have available to support

pupils to explore their HE aspirations, they should be given pride of place and repeatedly signalled for all to see... in a similar way to the Amberley Grove Alumni boards. A key finding from this data is that Amberley Grove school staff present visual representations around the school building of the academic and HE achievements of their pupils to indicate their pride and support for their alumni following academic routes post-compulsory education. This also indicates the importance to the school of its pupils pursuing HE, but that pupils may not be engaging with the visual displays in their HE decision-making plans, as actively as the school may expect. It calls into question who the audiences of their HE media content are and how the school may seek to fully engage their entire intended audience.

Widening Participation opportunities in Amberley Grove

This sub-section outlines one of the on-site Widening Participation events at Amberley Grove. It discusses how the event indicates the Widening Participation priorities within Amberley Grove and the subtle ways in which young people are encouraged and discouraged to engage with HE aspiration. Amberley Grove as a school was involved in providing its pupils with opportunities to engage with HE and the aspiration to it. One day, a large proportion of the young people in Year 9 (upwards of 100 pupils) were selected to participate in a whole day STEM WP opportunity on the Amberley Grove school campus. For those who participated, they did not have to attend their usual timetabled lessons. Instead they conducted staff-facilitated activities, organised by an external social enterprise. For those who were not invited to participate in the event, they had to remain in their usual lessons. On the day of the event, I spent my first hour of observations scurrying along the school halls to locate the pupils I was due to observe that morning. None of the young people were in their timetabled lessons; all the Year 9 pupils in my study were participating in this event.

The young people are huddled in 15 groups along the breadth of the sports hall; I know because the tables are clearly labelled. They are free to move around the tables, to explore all the activities taking place. I wander around the space, notepad in hand, receiving reassuring nods from pupils, and inquisitive looks from staff. Two supervising staff members from Amberley Grove ask about my role and I explain briefly. I then search out the participants. They are

dispersed across the hall, some more engaged than others. The event was one of many MOD initiatives to promote STEM subjects in schools. The young people who attended were invited based on their science aptitude. All the pupils were rushing around the hall when suddenly the facilitators called time on this activity. Seeing that the facilitators were struggling to settle the large crowd of pupils, the Amberley Grove staff kick into gear. They call all the students to order and within around 30 seconds each pupil found a seat, and perched quietly whilst they waited for further instructions on the next task. After a twenty-minute presentation on Engineering and other allied sciences, the large group of pupils are set a task involving computer coding.

It's a race: the first to program a robot and navigate it around a course will work out the clues and… win! The groups are pre-assigned, but after around ten minutes, it becomes clear that some young people are more invested than others. Adam is at the helm, along with Kyle, trying to manoeuvre the robot around the track. Amanda and Mya look on as Adam and Kyle run back to the table to repeatedly correct their coding instructions. Dylan, Jessica and Sophia are on the same team. Their table is in the middle of hall and they are still debating on their next course of action. I ask both groups about the day. Adam and Kyle are clearly in their element; Taylor and Amanda are unusually reserved and they both, but separately, wander around the hall peering at other teams' endeavours. Mya, in contrast, is almost as energised as Adam. She continuously offers suggestions on how to edit the coding instructions and waits anxiously in the queue by the trial robot track to reserve her team's space. At the other end of the hall, Gabby is sat with three other girls around a table talking. Noticing that Gabby is not taking part in the activities, I make a mental note to speak to her about how she is finding the event. Marianne is posted close to the other robot trial track cheering on the competitors. Strolling around the hall, I ask the other young people how they are finding the activity. Clear excitement comes from Adam, Kyle, Marianne and Mya; Dylan and Sophia are seriously engaged in a roundtable discussion about the coding procedures; whilst Taylor and Amanda are positive, even if their body language says otherwise. Gabby, however, is apathetic. "What's the point, Krystal? The only good thing about this is that I don't have to go to lessons!… But I'm bored, it's boring!". I reply, "…but what if you want to do engineering? … You never know what you'll learn if you do this task". Gabby is adamant – "Why?! I don't need to know this stuff anyway".

From my observations in activities such as these, I found that in Amberley Grove, activities surrounding HE aspiration, were always reserved for the learners that were considered to be highly academic. This was a recurrent theme, throughout the project, and was underpinned even by the fact that I was able to conduct the research primarily with "most-able, least-likely" young people, as this was perceived within the school as resulting in the least academic disruption. This suggests that in Amberley Grove, HE and the aspiration to it, is only considered by the school as an extra-curricular consideration. Guidance for post-16 and 18 pathways, was reserved predominantly for those most highly attaining. In addition, whether this opportunity was to facilitate interest in STEM or moreover, as a recruitment opportunity for the MOD, creates tensions around the role of WP in schools and how to engage all pupils in activities that offer insights into all disciplines within HE, rather than just STEM. This is important considering disproportionate representation of underrepresented groups, in particular those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in HE, in certain academic disciplines and also high tariff institutions in the UK, as explored in the literature review.

5.3.1.5   *cultural expectations and identities*

In the university applicant profile activity, the importance of cultural heritage was revisited by some of the young people. Despite working in a pair, Sophia asserts her authority and outlines the importance of family and heritage in making the decision about applying to university. For Sophia, the applicant "Mackenzie… she wants to go to uni in a country where her family's from… so you've got England, you've got Jamaica, you've got Vietnam, you've got India", "What about Vietnam?" Marianne interjects. The pair then catch a glimpse of Rita and Jamie's profile. "They drew out a box and everything, the year 8s - they make me feel so errrm less than!" Jamie and Rita smile and shrug, and return to quietly working on their profile. In crafting their "ideal university applicant profile", Sophia and Marianne asked if they could research universities on the internet. "Miss", Marianne calls again, "Can we use our phones for research?" I agreed, and soon other pairs Jessica and Gabby, Jamie and Rita, Eric and Samuel followed suit, searching online for locations to study and using the university location maps from on earlier research activity. The use of the internet to research university institutions is reflected in Sophia and Marianne's specificity of the institutions chosen for their applicant. Sophia scrolls through a list of universities in Vietnam on her phone. Turning to Marianne, she states "I want

her to go to either Hoi Chi Minh city or Hanoi, most likely Hanoi!" Specifically, the research occurs on their phone. Despite having access to computers, they are quick to use handheld devices to research at their fingertips about the university landscape.

As a group of ethnically diverse young people, references were occasionally made to their own cultural identities in relation to their HE aspirations and plans for the future. Family legacy is important for many in determining and developing aspiration, such as in Eric's case and Jada's case. The young people's plans for the future are not largely forced upon them by culture, be that culture of home, school or otherwise. Rather, culture guides feelings of identity and legitimacy to one's aspiration. Marianne and Amanda do not feel forced to hold certain aspirations because of their Asian culture, instead their aspirations interweave between their culture. For all of the girls, their cultural expectations as 21st century British women are compatible with academic plans and expectations, irrespective of their cultural heritage and socio-economic status. All the Year 9 females engage and partake in discussion around the cultural expectations and aspiration of an "Asian" female at different points during the research. Given the cultural heritage of some of the Year 9s, I believe that their reference to "Asian" relates to the Indian sub-continent. For these Asian young women, their future is intertwined with their knowledge of the role of a British Asian woman.

Moving to consider how cultural and ethnic identities were discussed by staff around the school, I found myself disheartened by the deficit narratives that some of the staff attributed to the Black pupils. One instance in the school staff room, involved me politely but reluctantly explaining in brief my role and research to a teacher whose lesson I had visited. In response, he felt it necessary to state "...Your research is really important especially for black girls! They need to aim higher – they have high grades but low aspirations - they all just want to do Health and Social Care." For this staff member, "Black girls", a singular group of course, chose to study Health and Social Care en masse. For him, this was support for, even evidence of, low aspiration; rather than a manifestation of the limitations and barriers they face to access a more varied GCSE curriculum, rather than a representation of what they aspire to do. This seemed a point of consideration across some staff in the school. Overall, there seemed to be a struggle and necessitated priority in the school to increase the average attainment of Caribbean pupils, as I was approached on subsequent occasions to discuss this and in turn its impact on their further

and higher educational aspirations of these young people more than once. This indicated that Black underachievement of young people within Amberley Grove was seen as an issue that staff were at a loss as to how to resolve, and they were curious to explore whether I, as the black female researcher, had further solutions for them.

5.3.1.6 self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept

As well as cultural identities and expectations, the young people indicated that discussing aspects of the future gave them a wider sense of confidence and shaped the young people's conceptualisation of HE aspiration. During the "Let's Talk about the Future" activity, the young people were asked to answer questions in pairs or trios about their plans for their future. The information sheet on the activity can be found in Appendix 7. They explored that for them, adulthood, in the main, started post 16. Many of the participants stated that they would become an adult at 18 years of age. For one, "18 is the age...to start driving and getting jobs. This is where future lies". Six participants shared that adulthood began at either 19 or 20, whilst only one participant explained that adulthood began above 20: at 25 "...in his opinion - He'll be more mature and independent...". When asked to complete the statement "In the future, I know I will be a great _____"; only three of the participants referred to characteristics other than specific occupations. Two of these participants, Amanda and Mya, explained that they did so out of expressed protest at determining a specific career for themselves; "I just don't know what job I want to do yet Miss!" Mya defended. Another participant, Taylor, stated that they would "...still be a nice person". The other participants articulated the proclamation in relation to explicitly defining a future occupation.

As well as this, young people's notions of educational success were expressed as a sub-topic of their self-efficacy. Although not initially proposed as part of the concept of HE aspiration, through my early observations and discussions with the young people and in the activity explored above "Let's talk about the Future", the notion of success was repeatedly discussed amongst the young people. Their choices and plans for the future were often articulated as individual, uninhibited decisions; only limited by their own dedication. First expressed openly, by Mya in the "let's talk about the future" activity, all of the young people articulate the sentiment that "no-one tells me what I should do but they encourage me to do something

successful", in varying degrees. That anyone could have the audacity to tell them exactly what to do – and them actually listen - is consistently refuted. Amanda has only been given "ideas" about what she should do; Kyle hasn't spoken to anyone about what he should do in the future "because [he] would want do what [he] wants; and whilst Sophia's mum agrees with her choice, "there is no one in her life, who tells her what she could be". That their future is strictly of their own making and theirs to determine and choose, is a consistent theme amongst the young people.

In the Autumn term of 2017, I held group discussions where I asked the question of "Who is successful?" to the young people in two sittings; one Year 8 group and one Year 9 group. All the participants were given a pen and invited to write on a large sheet who they felt were successful. To encourage all the young people to contribute, they were given sweets for every two names they wrote on the paper. They wrote names until they confirmed they had given an exhaustive list. The only British success making both the Year 8 and Year 9 lists was "Stormzy"; with the only other British success for the Year 9 pupils was "Stephen Hawkins". The other references who made it onto both lists were "Barack Obama", "Dr Martin Luther King Jr", "Parents" "Malala Yousafzai" and "Everyone". The Year 9 pupils had 32 successful figures on their list. They added the likes of "Pablo Escobar" with Kyle adding the caveat that "…You don't just have to be doing good things to be successful Miss", supported by nods from Taylor, Adam and Sophia. The Year 8 pupils kept their success stories much closer to home, with 9 of their 23, being British. Whilst the young people in both Year 8 and Year 9 listed YouTube stars as successful figures, the Year 9s named multiple examples of particular YouTube figures. This suggests that the young people's figures of success are often internationally-recognised. In addition, whilst the young people may recognise successful attributes in a wide variety of figures, HE participation was not referenced as an attribute of success in relation to these figures. This suggests that for these young people in this discussion, HE participation did not feature as an indicator of these successful figures, and may not explicitly serve as reference points for their own HE aspirations.

5.3.2   Summary

In re-considering how young people form their HE aspiration, I have found that the five aspects proposed earlier in the HE aspiration definition in section 2.3.4 do feature. However, complex considerations of self-agency, success, and evolving tensions between institutional policy and young people's autonomy play a role in shaping HE aspiration. The young people often articulated their plans for the future concisely. However, the similarity in, and restricted list of career choices in the activities; talks of indecision and uncertainty about the future throughout the research and the importance of parents in offering advice and agreeing choices, contrasted ironically with the young people's reiteration of the insignificance of parents to their final decision about the future. These suggest challenges with how the young people may share the HE aspirations particularly when asked by the adult, the stranger, the researcher. The self-confidence and positive self-concept for many, is often accompanied by recurrent need for reassurance and positive reinforcement.

5.4   Young people's Big Events

This subsection   presents the findings from an activity designed to explore the important timepoints in the young people's past, present and futures. It considers which big events these young people recognised as playing a pivotal role in their lives, past, present and future. Each young person was given their own poster (see Appendix 6) and invited to decorate it with images and text related to significant time-points within their life. They had the opportunity to detail eight big events on the poster alongside their dream for their future. I conducted a thematic analysis of the posters produced by Year 8 and 9 pupils, to identify key themes. Following a thematic analysis of the big events, I found that all but one of the young people referred to an educational milestone as an important point in their life. This suggests that educational factors are important for different young people at a variety of points in their life. However, the big events that the young people discussed were not exclusively educational, suggesting that whilst education is important for many young people it is situated within a context of other big events, which are linked to how young people construct their past, presents and futures.

Patterns were observed amongst the small group as to how the educational milestones were positioned within the young people's big events. University was a recurring theme amongst the posters. Illuminated by ongoing discussions with the young people, I was able to analyse patterns and other themes within the posters, of the presentation of educational, particularly further and higher educational events. This approach offered a nuanced approach to explore how young people construct and share their HE aspirations and insights into the differing levels of importance that young people place on HE and different stages of their educational journey. It also illuminates aspects related to HE aspiration that are not currently accounted for or formally articulated within the initial conceptualisation of HE aspiration.

The themes that were identified from the posters around young people's big events are presented below in Table 6 and 7 along with brief outlines of what each theme encompassed.

Table 8 - Big Event Themes from the Young People's Amazing Life Posters

Big event Themes	Outline
A-Levels	The popular post-GCSE qualification – future-oriented
Awards	Prizes received by the YP
Birthday Parties	Party thrown for the YP at their birthday
Birthdays	Moment of birth or commemoration of an important birthday
College	Post-16 educational institution, importantly separate from a school
Driving	The YP passing their driving test and getting a car
Extra-curricular Exams	Exams taken by the actor in addition to their current subjects
Family Births	YP's relative was born
Family Marriage	YP's relative was married
Friendship Milestones	Important moment in the YP's friendship
GCSE Choices	The time which the YP's selected their GCSE subjects
GCSE Results	The day which the YP will receive their GCSE results
Hobby Discovery	A time when the YP found a particular interest or passion
Holiday	A family trip – UK or abroad
Job	Career plan
Marriage	When the YP foresees they will get married
Money	Their future wealth
Moved House	A time when the YP moved home, within the UK or abroad
Other Life Events	Four personal events – Undisclosed as they may jeopardise anonymity
Other future Life events	One event – Undisclosed as they may jeopardise anonymity
Planned Trips	Very recent or upcoming trips abroad
Primary school Milestones	Starting primary school – first or subsequent times

Reading Milestones	Learning to read in English or another language
Retirement	Where the YP will retire
SATS	Completing and Receiving results in Year 6 Statutory tests
School Trips	A school trip – UK or abroad
Secondary school Milestones	Starting secondary school
Social Responsibility	The YP will use their resources to contribute to society
University	Attending University

The most common big events within the group were Primary and Secondary Milestones, which involved starting school, the pupils' SATS results and the future big event of attending university. The "Other life events" were largely unique to individual pupils but presented events that could not easily be disclosed without potentially compromising participant anonymity.

Table 9 - The Young People's Past Present and Future Life Events

	Big event themes	Year 8						Year 9									
		Rose	Jada	Samuel	Eric	Jamie	Rita	Adam	Kyle	Taylor	Jessica	Dylan	Amanda	Mya	Marianne	Gabby	Sophia
Past	Primary school Milestones			✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓			
	Secondary school Milestones		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
	Family Births		✓		✓		✓								✓		
	Family Marriage		✓												✓		
	Holiday		✓	✓		✓					✓		✓	✓			
	SATS				✓			✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
	GCSE Choices							✓	✓						✓		
	Birthdays	✓			☐							✓	✓	✓			
	Moved House	✓	✓	✓								✓					
	Hobby Discovery									✓					✓		
	Friendship Milestones					✓							✓	✓			
	School Trip					✓							✓	✓			
	Other Life Events	☐				✓							✓				✓
	Reading Milestones	✓	✓		✓												✓
Present	Extra-curricular Exams												✓	✓			
	Holiday						✓								✓		
	Awards							✓									
Future	GCSE Results							✓	✓	✓							
	University							☐	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
	A-Levels							✓	✓	✓							
	College										✓					✓	
	Driving							✓	✓	✓							
	Money											✓				✓	
	Job								✓		✓					✓	
	Marriage								✓	✓						✓	✓
	Other future Life events										✓						
	College																
	Social Responsibility										✓					✓	
	Retirement																✓
Future Dream	Job Specific	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓				✓	
	Non-specific				✓			✓		✓			✓	✓			✓

The young people were far more similar and unified in their identification of big events than they are dissimilar. Overall, big events for all of the young people were predominantly situated in the future and the past, with only a few young people illustrating big events in the present, The Year 8s are exclusively focused on big events in the past and present. For the Year 9 pupils, they are linked by more diversely-timed events. For the Year 9 pupils, educational achievements such as SATS, GCSE Results and university are popular big events. This suggests that for the Year 9s in particular, educational achievements are important to how they constructed the big events in their lives, and consequently their past, present and future.

University is an important big event to the Year 9s. As a big event, university serves as a central theme which links these young people, emphasising the importance of personal achievements to their past-present-future such as GCSE results or A-Levels, and those with a focus on how important social responsibility is for their constructions of their past-present and future. University as a big life event is mentioned by two discrete camps of young people; 1) as a social good for those who suggested that social responsibilities were a big event in their life or 2) as a personal milestone for these young people. As well as this, university is linked to college and A-Levels suggesting that at least some young people know that both big events can feature on the past-present-future trajectory alongside university. Within this group, they are mutually distinct; young people must participate in either college or A-Levels, not both.

To combat growing dissatisfaction in school, some of the young people focused on big events in the future over the past and present. For some of the young people, these big events were related to the commitment to social justice and what they expressed as their social responsibilities. They discussed the future as a concept that they knew they could shape themselves; in the future, they could succeed and assert themselves. This echoed the sentiments raised throughout the group about their self-determination and agency in their HE aspiration. Marianne goes as far as to propose that her future will sit in direct contrast to her own childhood experience, and she plans to offer her children everything she wishes she could experience. Social responsibility and tackling social injustice forms an important part of many of the young people's futures. Gabby and Jessica in particular, discuss at length their passion for challenging social injustice. The importance of paying back to society in the future as a

dynamic of how young people form their HE aspiration, particularly for females, may serve as an area for future research consideration.

5.4.1   Summary

In thinking about HE aspiration, this research indicates that it was important to consider the role of big events, in addition to academic plans, in shaping the educational identity of these young people. This was because young people at different points within their educational journey and development were more or less keen to consider past or future-oriented events.

5.5   Discussing Education

Finally, drawing on the conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed in school, this section further considers how these young people may develop HE aspiration as an evolving process in conjunction with others, including their classmates and within the context of their school. Expanding the conceptualisation of HE aspiration, the young people discussed aspects related to their formations of HE aspiration which were not fully accounted for by the conceptual framework. These aspects were around young people's subject choices and the corresponding hierarchies the young people attached to those choices and those of their other classmates.

5.5.1   Young people's current and future subject choices including academic hierarchies

Whilst prior, current and future academic attainment was considered as shaping HE aspiration for the young people, the conceptual framework does not take into consideration the role of current and future subject choices in young people's HE aspiration. Throughout my time researching with the young people, the role of GCSE subject choices was repeatedly discussed in groups, directly with me as the researcher, and during interactive activities. From its inception into the consciousness of the pupils in Amberley Grove in Year 8, it began to orient the young people's focus on their future educational journey including their aspirations to participate in HE. The young people also discussed and shared their knowledge of the educational hierarchies that exist across subjects and how these shaped their HE aspirations.

5.5.2   GCSE subject choices

Many of the participants talked about not being sure what they wanted to do, university and career wise. Some were reluctant to articulate a specific career and just said in our multiple discussions and activities, they were unsure yet what their plans were post-compulsory education. However, some students, such as Amanda, very much took a milestone view of the future. GCSE options and streams determined or discounted GCSE subjects accordingly; GCSE subject enjoyment and results determined A-Levels; A-Levels pre-determined university subjects and university subjects would decide career choice. These were often linked; no formal decisions would be made until the milestone was reached and attained.

GCSEs serve as a pivotal time point to determine future education and career trajectories. A few young people in the group, like Amanda, suggested "...it all depends on what GCSEs I get..." and had chosen to leave decisions about their future subject and career plans until after they received their GCSE results. This drastically condenses their decision-making period and greatly minimises the opportunity for HE aspiration in the wider conceptualisation. In this situation, decisions about the future are made in the context of many certainties about educational attainment, rather than considering future possibilities. In a sense, for some, the future begins only after GCSEs. Making decisions about the future armed with GCSE results, also links attainment to aspiration for some of these young people. It possibly even replaces the latter with the former, where to aspire is to attain, where the goal driven plans for the future may become the time-sensitive plans in the present. However, as this research only explored GCSE subject choices, it is difficult to determine the role of GCSE results in the young people's future choices.

In contrast, for others like Mya and Adam, the future extends beyond educational aspirations. Some young people such as these see aspiration as a series of singular life milestones to be completed, listing them as "University", "Job" and "Marriage". This suggests that the future is seen as linear, with aspirations occurring only once and signify goals to be achieved, rather than as evolving and occurring over time, concurrently and potentially more than once.

Certain GCSE subjects were chosen and studied as a form of self-expression for the young people. For example, "Triple Science" was a first choice for all those adamant on a career in, or allied to, Science. For some, this was a seamless process between subject choice and subject participation. However, for others, such as Gabby and Samuel, this process was not quite as straightforward. Gabby was particularly passionate about her social responsibility and ensuring that her future career aligned with her strong moral compass. She also wanted to study Sociology at GCSE and saw it as a first step in understanding social justice and challenging social disparities. However, her plans were thwarted when the subject was cancelled at GCSE. She soon became disconnected from the other young people and disheartened by her actual GCSE subjects. Samuel, on the other hand, found himself deflated by the reality that his passion for Science may not be being translated into his performance, having not been invited to participate in "Triple Science".

When the young people were unable to participate in their preferred GCSE subject choices, this added to any frustration and disengagement with their education and "the system" as remarked by Gabby in the "What is education for" activities. This could also stunt their aspiration as they see GCSE subject choice as being a direct determinant of future education choices and subsequent career choices. In addition, the young people talked of feeling physically constrained and suffocated by the regimental way the school was structured. Gabby, Adam and Jessica in particular, expressed their feelings that school was "like a prison". The school had recently implemented a new security system in which the external building doors were only fully accessible during lesson changeovers. Gabby felt that, for her, this new system had further exacerbated feelings of restraint and "suffocation" - "You just can't go anywhere!" she cried. This conversation followed on from the young people's discussions about the Government "using them", as suggested by Jessica. Most laughed nervously at Jessica's outburst, but she remained adamant. Dylan also expressed that "schools are like factories" that aimed to "reproduce children (and workers)" who were the same and not free to think or create independently.

From the group discussion with the young people around their favourite subjects and their subject choices throughout the academic calendar, these participants' favourite subjects did not appear to mirror their GCSE subject choices. Also, where a young person was particularly skilled at an Arts subject, this was often discarded as a future GCSE choice in favour of a Science subject. This was often the case for Music and Art. Music was a popular favourite subject amongst the Year 8 and 9s. However, it was not a popular subject taken amongst the "most-able, least-likely" young people. Those who did, expressed wanting to pursue a career aligned to Music.

5.5.3   Triple Science vs Double Science

From my observations, discussions with the young people and collation of their school timetables, I found that for both the Year 8 and 9 pupils, subjects allied to Science were more popular GCSE subject choices than those allied with the Arts. However, there was not a strict dichotomy between Science and Arts subjects; they more likely featured on a spectrum of GCSE choice. The young people loosely separate into subject camps. The Double Award science qualification is viewed by the young people taking Triple Science Award, as Science for the non-

Science aspiring young people; those wishing to or studying an Arts subject were also almost exclusively taking Double Science.

Despite these young people participating in the same number of GCSE qualifications, the hierarchy between the Arts and Science subjects, and even within Science subjects, for example Double and Triple Science, was pronounced. The subject hierarchy sometimes even led the young people to attribute students to a hierarchy, based on their subject participation. Being good at Science became a pre-requisite for pupil and educational success amongst the group. For many of the "most-able, least-likely" participants, Triple Science is the gateway to any educational future worth having. It is the first choice on a trajectory to studying at HE. For those taking the qualification, anyone not taking it was closing the door on Science post-GCSE, going to a "good" university and participating on a popular course. Those "most-able, least-likely" who do not study the Triple Science GCSE qualification, must negotiate this dominant peer discourse. They justify their choice in different ways. For example in Sophia's case she emphasised how important her alternative subject choices were instead, whereas, in Eric's case, he highlighted his chosen qualification in Science as just that - a choice. For Eric, Triple Science was one that he refused to take but was appropriately qualified for. Gabby became displayed complete disengagement with Science, whilst Samuel was surprised to find out that studying the Triple Science GCSE was additional rather than compulsory. Young people taking Triple Science become well-connected within the group by their subject choices, even if their subject interests differed widely from the group. This is the case for Jada. Her GCSE subject choices are popular amongst the young people. This gives her the opportunity to maintain engagement with her peers at GCSE level, unlike her subject interest in Art which saw her isolated. Her subject choices make her far more interconnected within the group. These interconnections allow for increased opportunities to discuss HE aspiration with others "most-able, least-likely", which may enable increased evolution and interrogation of their HE aspiration.

5.5.4 Summary

Overall, the young people discussed the importance of their GCSE and Science subject choice in relational to their academic identity within their school. Throughout the research, these appeared to become increasing important to their formation of HE aspiration, as they positioned the self-efficacy and self-confidence in their present and future academic plans based on their superiority of their subject choices. The opportunity to study different subjects, both empowered and constrained the young people in their discussions about their HE aspirations. The evolving discussions throughout the research about subject choices and the importance of Science study to each of their constructions of their academic identity as high academic achievers in the past, present and future, suggested that subject choice became increasingly key to how these young people formed their HE aspiration. The introduction of subject choice was a pivotal moment in the young people's academic decision-making and for many signalled a moment to assert their academic agency. The next chapter discusses how these findings link to the conceptual framework and the wider literature.

6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses how the findings presented in the previous chapter address the research questions. It interrogates the conceptual framework and draws on content presented in the literature review. The chapter is separated into four main sections.

Firstly, I begin by re-presenting the conceptual framework, indicating how it links with the research questions. Secondly, I discuss how the findings address the research sub-question: *What is Higher Education aspiration for "most-able, least-likely" young people in this school?* To do this, I draw on the wider definition of HE aspiration used within the conceptual framework. I discuss under headings of each aspect of HE aspiration how the findings answer the question above, in light of the literature presented in the initial review.

In the third section, I draw on the conceptual framework and the literature, to discuss how young people engage with the other stakeholders in the school about their HE aspiration and what this suggests about the role that others in school may play in young people's formation of it. This focuses on how the findings address the following research sub-questions:

- *How do these young people discuss and interact about their HE aspirations, with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and within their school?*
- *How do these classmates and their school play a role in the young people formations of HE aspirations?*

Finally, I discuss my approach to ethnographic case study and the methods used to research young people's HE aspiration, in relation to the contribution of the research to challenging deficit narratives of those "most-able, least-likely". I offer insights into how and why WP researchers, policy-makers and practitioners should reposition young people in WP, as discussed in the literature review and conceptual framework. I argue that the young people are value-adding to the WP research process and can also contribute novel and nuanced insights into evolving conceptualisations of HE aspiration.

6.2 Re-presenting the conceptual framework

This section re-presents the illustration of the conceptual framework as presented earlier in the thesis. Figure 1 below is an outline of the initial conceptualisation of the formation of HE aspiration and demonstrates how it links to the research questions. The orange shaded text boxes detail the research questions. The boxes are positioned within the sections of the conceptual framework that the research questions seek to explore. The outline of the conceptual framework of how HE aspiration is formed by the young people centres on the Individual, the singular young person in the middle. Through their interactions with their School, their Classmates and Other Stakeholders that they come into contact with, they form their concept of HE aspiration. In the conceptual framework, HE aspiration is considered to be continuously evolving, through (re-)negotiations and realisations of the young people. The conceptual framework also suggests that the concept of HE aspiration is formed by other stakeholders and shaped by external factors, that sometimes bypass the formations of young people.

Figure 8 - The conceptual framework of the formation of HE aspiration

Other Stakeholder

interact

interact

interac

Research question - What is Higher Education (HE) aspiration for "most-able, least likely" young people (YP) in this school?

Individual

Research question - How do these classmates and their school play a role in the YP's formations of HE aspirations?

interact

interact

External factors

Research question - How do these young people discuss and interact about their HE aspirations , with their "most-able, least likely" classmates and within their school?

School

interact

Classmate

interact

Evolving negotiations and realisations of young people's Higher Education Aspiration: *goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012); young people's knowledge of HE; interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014); levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young*

The conceptual framework also outlines the definition of HE aspiration drawn from the literature review:

goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012); young people's knowledge of HE; interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014); levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education.

The definition suggests that HE aspiration from the literature is a complex concept, including aspects that are formed by the individual, but are also shaped by educational priorities and structural hierarchies. The next section of this chapter focuses on how the findings of my research present these aspects of HE aspiration. By discussing how the findings align with the aspects of HE aspiration within the definition above, initially presented in the conceptual framework, it explores the answer to the research question - What is Higher Education (HE) aspiration for "most-able, least-likely" young people (YP) in this school?

6.3   Defining HE aspiration

To define HE aspiration, this section discusses the research findings in light of the conceptual framework. Similar to the findings sections in Chapter 5, this section of the discussion has been divided into aspects of HE aspiration as outlined in the definition of HE aspiration presented in the conceptual framework. These aspects are: goal-driven plans for the future; knowledge of HE; self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept; cultural expectations and identities; past, present, future educational and career identities and navigating priorities and hierarchies of school stakeholders. As well as discussing nuanced insights into aspects of young people's HE aspiration from the findings which aligned with the conceptual framework, I discuss how 'big events' may be related to young people's formation of HE aspiration and the role of young people's current and future subject choices, including academic hierarchies, in shaping their HE aspiration.

6.3.1 Goal-driven plans for the future

In conceptualising HE aspiration, the young people reflected on their goal-driven plans for the future. This sub-section draws on literature and the conceptual framework to discuss how these goal driven plans for the future form part of HE aspiration. The vignettes in the previous chapter presented findings of how some of the young people's plans for the future are explored through the role of home and place(as presented in Jamie and other young people's vignettes); asserted as a means to support their future families, through specific career plans and milestones (by Rita, Gabby and Jessica); and guided by achievement of academic milestones in the present (for example in Amanda's vignette).

One example of how HE aspiration was formed and manifested in goal-driven plans for the future was through discussions around proximity to home and discussions of place. For these young people, home and place are significant orienting points in their decision-making post-compulsory education. As discussed earlier in this thesis, Mangan et al (2010) suggests that the choice to stay close to home may restrict high-achieving applicants' choices for HE. However, to widen the scope of HE choices to beyond a commutable distance, may for some, disrupt links to home that have significance, including and beyond familial ties.

For young people such as Jamie, her life history, and the desire to maintain roots close to home as a "most-able, least-likely" young person, sits at odds with her aspiration to explore the world and study at university abroad. I have chosen not to disclose the specificity of Jamie's experience to maintain the anonymity of the young person. Nevertheless, for Jamie, the HE aspiration to study abroad may come at a cost too heavy to pay, when balanced with the importance of home. The importance of home and place, was presented in work by Mangan et al (2010) as a constraining factor in the consideration of HE aspiration for working class young people. However, being close or far away from home in the future was important and empowering for many in this group of "most-able, least-likely" young people in Amberley Grove. Home, including ties to a place, included their physical home in Birmingham, for example in Rose's or Marianne's outline;, close to their family as in Jamie's experience or Rita's plans, or potentially close to their country of ethnic origin, as in Samuel's vignette.

Research spanning twenty years by Thrupp (1999), Roberts (2009) and Thompson (2019), was discussed earlier in the thesis, suggesting that there is a presumed harmony between home and school for those from middle classes. Roberts (2009) and Thompson (2019) subsequently explored additional complexities of class structures that impact the HE trajectories of working class young people. Reflecting on the definition of HE aspiration as, in part, goal driven plans for the future, the importance of place and home for the young people in this research sheds light on the findings of Roberts (2009). Roberts suggests that young people from working class backgrounds often have to navigate a decision-making process unlike that of their middle class peers. In my research, the decisions they make about their plans are high stakes. These decisions may even risk detaching them from their home, sense of place and familial ties. My research also suggests that HE aspiration is formed for these young people through an ongoing analysis of the costs and benefits of HE, shaped within a social context that structures access to effective resources to make a measured decision (Thompson, 2019:2). The conceptual framework of the formation of HE aspiration does not currently account for the nuances and importance of the home-based ties, be those familial or otherwise, that these "most-able, least-likely" young people draw upon in shaping their HE aspiration.

6.3.2   Young people's knowledge of HE

This section firstly discusses how young people's knowledge of HE forms part of their HE aspiration. It discusses how varied young people's questions were about HE but also that their suppositions about HE often went under-discussed. Secondly, it considers how young people's knowledge of Oxford and Cambridge shaped their knowledge of HE, underpinned their knowledge of institutional hierarchies and was linked to their formation of HE aspiration.

Presented in the vignettes are questions that the young people asked the researcher about university. Their questions indicated their underlying knowledge of HE and how many of them were curious about how HE fitted with their expectations and suppositions of it. They asked questions about what university might be like for them. This formed part of their HE aspiration, as they indicated their current knowledge of HE was shaped by their intrigue and decision-making around participating in it. The questions presented in the vignettes include the types of subject provision at HE as suggested by Jessica; the value of university presented by Dylan; and the social elements offered at institutions,

presented by Adam and Sophia. However, this intrigue about their own potential HE aspiration was rarely reflected in their discussions about the ideal university applicant. The young people's profiles of the ideal HE applicant were more often formed as a type of fantasy roster rather than related to specific provisions at an institution. Instead, their discussions all repeatedly emphasised the need to find a good university. In their search to establish a good institution and course for their ideal applicant, almost all of the pairs mentioned Oxford and Cambridge, with most other UK HE institutions mentioned only once. This suggests that for these young people, their knowledge of HE was centred around whether an institution or course was 'good'.

The notion of things being good in their future was referenced in work by Bok (2010), as well as Archer et al (2014). Both refute any poverty of aspirations amongst the young people in their research, much like the young people in my research. However, in Bok and Archer's work, the young people refer to wanting the good life or good working life, rather than relating good to institutional or subject hierarchies. As suggested in work by Appadurai (2004), these young people's notions of what is good, had almost become subsumed into local ideas and re-articulated as certain wants and choices for themselves. These localised ideas may not be unique to these young people at Amberley Grove. However, that many of the young people emphasise the importance of a good university or course, suggests that the idea of universities and courses being good is important in the young people's formation of their HE aspiration.

In discussing the ideal university applicant, seven out of eight pairs reported that the ideal applicant would apply to both Oxford and Cambridge universities. However, a longstanding policy in the undergraduate application process means that it is only possible to apply to one of these two institutions on a student's UCAS application in a single year. Either the young people were unaware of this, or it did not occur to them to mention it when considering the ideal applicant. The selection of Oxford and Cambridge by almost all the young people as destinations for the ideal applicant suggests that the young people are aware of a hierarchy within HE, but that their knowledge of it is not especially detailed. Research by Shiner and Noden (2015) which explored meritocratic ideas of HE application, suggests that institutions such as Oxford perpetuate disparities in application rates, by failing to acknowledge inequalities that impact educational opportunities. The finding that the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are most often key to young people's formation of the ideal

applicant was irrespective of whether or not the subject the young people's ideal applicant proposed to study was available at the chosen university. This may suggest that presumed prestige and familiarity are more important at this age to create a reference point for university participation, than knowledge of the HE location and practicalities of study. The popularity of both Oxford and Cambridge in the applicant profiles as a destination for university, suggests that for these young people, the institutions are equally important to the applicant profile, and not too dissimilar. The other institutions appear to hold less significance.

Beyond Oxford, Cambridge, one other UK institution and two institutions in the USA Ivy League, the other 17 institutions are somewhat disparate in location, with some close-by, others nationally distant and others internationally distant. The locations of the HE destinations were not evenly distributed across the country, nor the world. Beyond Oxford and Cambridge, the selections of the young people were region-centred. When exploring university institutions outside the UK, there was a strong preference for ideal applicants to apply to prestigious universities in the USA. However, two pairs of pupils did suggest non-UK and non-USA destinations; one pair suggested these destinations as a cultural reference point, the other pair underpinned these as a desire to explore beyond the UK and the USA. The HE locations were not random; they were proximal, as in they were selected because they were situated close to a point of attachment or origin. Nevertheless, the popularity of prestigious institutions was noticeable in the young people's knowledge of HE and suggested that these institutions were particularly well-known amongst the group.

Referring back to work by Riegle-Crumb et al (2011) and Wong (2015), the findings from my research with the "most-able, least-likely" young people suggested that studying and succeeding at science subjects was largely to fulfil education and career aspirations in subjects allied to science. Examples included the plans to study Computing or to study Medicine and become a medical doctor. My study was of a very small sample of young people, but it concurs with findings by Wong (2015) that Science is rarely discussed by young people in relation to HE aspiration as a subject discipline on its own, but rather that it serves an aspirational function. Throughout my time in the school, my role as a social science researcher often felt questioned or undermined, with the school and staff discussing careers allied with Science, for example Engineering and IT development, in classrooms and in WP events. This

suggests that the school and staff may be perpetuating rather than challenging the prolific "gendered and racialized discourses of scientists" (Wong, 2015:19).

6.3.3 self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-concept

As well as their knowledge of HE, the young people exercised their sense of self through their self-confidence and how they articulated their HE aspirations. Some of the young people, such as Taylor, Amanda, Adam and Mya chose not to articulate specific educational or career aspirations for themselves. This was a finding which corresponded with research by Gutman and Schoon (2012), who found that high academic achievers were less likely to outline more concrete educational aspirations. Work by Archer (2008) and Wong (2012) suggested that young people from ethnically diverse and lower socio-economic backgrounds, including those who are high-achieving, are exposed to discourses around being the ideal student. In an effort to assert their individual agency and power to self-determine their HE aspiration, and limit engagement in the educational hierarchies amongst the "most-able, least-likely", it is possible that they choose to circumnavigate pressure to enact their HE aspirations by withholding details of them. They may choose not to outline details of the HE aspiration which may be considered as an opportunity to abstain from the identity performativity referred to by Wong (2012:61). Interpreting the Amberley Grove young people's apprehension to detail their HE aspiration, it may be that there are particularly high stakes associated with disclosing HE aspiration when young people also possess high prior attainment. This aligns with my conceptual framework of the formation of HE aspiration, which references that HE aspiration is marred with uncertainty, risk and doubt for many individuals from "most-able, least-likely" backgrounds (Reay, 1998), alongside others such as Boliver (2017), Butler (2012)).

As well as young people's self-confidence to abstain from articulating specific goal driven plans, all of the young people also explored notions of success in the group discussions. In their discussion around successful figures, they referenced figures from across popular culture – including politics, the arts, fashion, science and, the media. Many of the young people also proposed icons of success, with parents being a popular choice amongst the groups. In thinking about success and supporting young people's development of their HE aspiration, Basit (1996) encourages schools to exploit the interest of parents of ethnic minority backgrounds in their children's educational journey. The Amberley Grove

young people made multiple references to their parents as successful and linked to their own visions of success. In addition, with the importance of their parents to guiding – rather than forcing - the young people's HE aspirations, the findings suggest that there may be room for Amberley Grove to further embed a home-school partnership that extends to HE aspiration. This partnership could also incorporate role models for the young people, which broaden or even subvert the school's stereotypical and potentially outdated ideas about the educational and career aspirations of their young people.

The broad nature of the HE aspirations of the young people, from specific educational and career goals to wide and ambiguous plans for the future, indicate that these young people hold varying forms of aspirational capital (Yosso; 2005; Crozier, 2005; Archer and Francis, 2006; Basit, 2012). It also suggests that the self-confidence that the young people wield in the formation of their HE aspiration is also sometimes regulated by risk and uncertainty, which may shape their HE aspirations.

6.3.4   Cultural expectations and identities,

For many of the young people, cultural identities and links offered an orienting place for their educational aspirations. Discourse on ethnicity and cultural heritage entered wider classroom discussions around HE aspiration. For some, this was discussed in relation to location and created a proximal reference point for potential study abroad in the ideal applicant activity. For others, open conversations around ethnicity and cultural heritage were established, where classmates had similar cultural and ethnic affiliations. None of the young people identified themselves as "white" or "English". They identified with a variety of multiple ethnic identities and some had affinities, direct connections and/or experiences with other nations and ethnicities.

Both Archer (2002) and Basit (1996) problematise the stereotypes around British Asian Muslim pupils' plans after leaving secondary school. I observed limited discussion among the Amberley Grove young people on cultural considerations in relation to their HE aspirations. The lack of discussion around any racialised and gendered patterns of HE aspiration concurs with Archer et al's (2014) work. At 13 and 14, for these young people, there was limited reference to any racialised or gender disparities in the realisation of their HE aspiration. However, similar to Archer et al (2014), I did observe them discussing

and voicing gendered, socio-cultural and religious expectations during the fieldwork. Marianne, for example, felt proud of her Asian heritage, but constricted by what she felt were her limited experiences and she was keen to move away from home. In addition, cultural heritage played a role in shaping Samuel's knowledge of education and aspiration. The opportunity to be educated in the country of his maternal heritage restored his connection to the place. It also gave him alternative options to aspire to live and work outside of the UK. Some of the young people expressed the importance of staying true to one's culture to guide them, rather than needing to force their aspirations.

Past, present, future educational and career identities

For many of the young people, their past and present educational identities were linked to their past and present educational achievements. This was the case, for example, for Jessica, who felt that her underachievement was shaping how she engaged with education in the present and with her plans for the future. Jessica was interested in being an artist. As discussed in Jessicas' vignette, during the course of the fieldwork, she increasingly struggled to assert her interest in the subject and explore her educational identity as an artist through the study of Art and Design at Amberley Grove. Jessica explained that her academic attainment was lower than would be expected based on her prior attainment and that this was also impacting the time she had available to focus her interests on subjects such as Art. Her other subject choices were being given a higher academic priority, as evidenced through her reluctant attendance at further tutoring. Drawing on work by Pomerantz and Pomerantz (2002), who discuss how underachievement has not been systematically explored and addressed within the education system, Jessica's experience suggests that underachievement also shapes opportunities to access educational and career support that may fuel future identities. The school and the tutoring solutions offered, failed to provide the context specific guidance, as recommended by Ofsted (2015), that Jessica desired. This initially limited Jessica's opportunity to explore this possible self of studying Art post-compulsory education, as discussed in work by Harrison (2018), that Jessica was considering.

Having considered how educational underachievement shapes HE aspiration, I will now discuss how opportunities to explore different subjects also shapes how young people envisage their education

and career identities. For Jessica, her capacity to aspire to HE, a capacity which is explored in greater detail in work by Appadurai (2004), Bok (2010) and Prodonovich et al (2014), was also being hindered by her knowledge of HE; her HE aspiration was not being effectively scaffolded by her school. During the research activities, Jessica became noticeably disengaged with the project which asked specifically about university plans. Jessica was unaware that she could, if she wished, study Art and design at university. Here, Jessica's knowledge of HE was contributing to her self-excluding from the "most-able, least-likely" group as she felt that her educational and career identities could not align with going to university like her classmates. However, Jessica's reaction to the possibility of studying Art at university specifically, encouraged her to re-position herself as part of the "most-able, least-likely" group, and opened an avenue for her to explore options to broaden her future educational and career identities. In engaging in a discussion around HE aspiration, she was able to broaden her knowledge of HE, which could include one of her future educational and career identities. From this finding, I argue that HE aspiration is a concept that is developed, formed and learnt in discussion with others. Where young people's knowledge of HE is not effectively questioned and critiqued, it may stunt their HE aspiration as they may self-exclude from critical conversations around HE that may guide their future educational and career identities.

As well as this, the study of Sociology and subsequent curtailment of the subject as a GCSE option impacted Gabby's HE aspiration. Her discussions suggested that she felt silenced and stifled by the lack of acknowledgement by Amberley Grove of the importance for her of her GCSE choices. For the young people overall, choosing GCSEs suddenly created a tangible link between their educational past, present and future. This seemed to be the first point in secondary school when these young people became overwhelmingly aware that their educational attainment in the past and their choices in the present have an impact on their educational future.

Biology, Chemistry and Physics were popular GCSE subject choices across the entire group, with Triple Science repeatedly discussed in conversations during the research activities that were unsolicited by the researcher. This suggests that these subjects were particularly important to their knowledge of their HE aspiration. Many of these young people participated in the three subjects, enabling opportunities for their increased discussions. This left a few "most-able, least-likely", namely Gabby and Sophia, Eric and Samuel, unintentionally isolated from those common interactions, for example

around HE aspiration. They had picked subjects that were unpopular actual choices amongst the "most-able, least-likely" young people.

The discussion above explores how young people's under-attainment and subject choice may shape their past, present and future educational and career identities and may form part of HE aspiration. Referring back to the McIntosh report (2019), considered in Chapter 2.2, it explored post-16 aspirations and outcomes in a large scale econometric study of young people. It found that despite institutional changes between the 2006 and 2015 GCSE cohort, there were minimal changes in aspirations to apply to HE. From my review of this report, I found three key considerations of how institutional features impact HE aspiration remained unclear. The first of these was the role of young people's agency in driving their search for information to support their HE aspiration. This was explored in Jessica's vignette, with her encountering challenges in asserting her educational identities and subject interests. I would argue that for Jessica, the opportunity to question her knowledge of HE, led to a reconsideration of possible future educational identities. Jessica demonstrated self-assuredness and agency by exploring what options may exist for the study of Art and Design.

In addition to the role of agency, the McIntosh report also questions how institutional considerations around subject choices and hierarchies play a role in HE aspiration. There is a complex interplay between the young people's agency, the institutional structures of Amberley Grove and the external priorities of WP stakeholders across the country. This is combined with the power dynamics in the subject choices and hierarchies of these young people. Both echo work by Archer et al (2014), who found that even by the age of 12 and 13, children are already becoming aware of "complex gendered, classed and racialised inequalities and identities," (pg.68) in their educational and career plans, alongside constant re-articulations that align their imagined plans with what they believe to be realistic ones. For the Amberley Grove young people, that educational and career identities are of their own choosing, was a recurrent theme across their discussions. However, whilst the young people were asked by their school to choose GCSE subject preferences, it was not until after they were placed in their subject streams that they realised that their choice was not really a choice at all. In exploring the context in which young people are required to navigate individual, embedded academic choices, according to Roberts (2009), limitations were placed on these young people to realise their HE aspirations in the setting.

Whilst exploring the purpose of education and what they would change, the Year 9 pupils expressed feeling restricted at school and wanting to have the freedom to pursue different subjects, whether at, or even outside, of school. The proposal of studying for an interest outside of school was made by Amanda and Mya, who made it clear that "education was not school". Some young people embrace, even welcome, the steering of their choices, as guidance. Others feel forlorn at the loss of a loved subject, whilst others feel frustrated that the system has failed them and become increasingly ostracised and disengaged. Some Year 9 pupils for example Jessica, Amanda and Mya discussed above, expressed disappointment that they were unable to study exactly what they would like to and were instead urged to participate in certain subjects. This discourse further re-emphasised the divide between "Triple Science" and "Double Science" in the young people's discussions.

As well as the challenges, expressed by those "most-able, least-likely" around their constrained subject choices, an Amberley Grove teacher was eager to detail the contradictory predicament around statutory careers education, information, advice and guidance. As presented in the Findings chapter, the staff member felt that the redirection of careers support for young people to schools was a loss. This new directive for schools meant that he was now approached by young people for careers advice that he was unequipped to provide. Far from implying the need for further careers training for teachers, he was suggesting that this was a wider ontological and epistemological discrepancy. He was aware that schools were responsible for delivering careers advice to their pupils following the disbanding of Connexions and the introduction of statutory guidance from the 'Careers Guidance and Inspiration in Schools' policy by the Department for Education (2015). However, he was disillusioned by the fact that those, including himself, building rapport and regularly interacting with the young people, were intrinsically ill-equipped to support them to aspire beyond, or outside of, HE. He suggested that this was the gap that Connexions could often plug. I would argue that without reliable and independent careers support, advice and guidance, young people may be making decisions on their educational plans, based on limited, largely anecdotal advice and guidance in school and rarely evolving careers and educational information, from a variety of sources. These incompatibilities in a school like Amberley Grove with a large ethnic minority population, could further exacerbate differential and sub-standard careers advice for those from ethnic minority backgrounds, in light of work by Moote and Archer (2018), who suggest that many schools are unable to offer impartial advice

to their pupils. However, further research is needed to determine the extent of the careers engagement in schools such as Amberley Grove and the role of the school in this provision.

This sub-section has discussed how underachievement shaped the educational and career identities of one of the young people and consequently contributed to their evolving formation and (re-)articulation of their HE aspiration. In section 5.3.1.4, I also explored how HE was presented – or arguably, advertised - to the young people in display boards and through other media; but was not effectively targeted or contextualised, for example through GCSE grade attainment and HE destination display boards. I also discussed how academic subject choices shaped the young people's identities related to education and careers. I then considered a staff member's conflicts with the neo-liberal shift towards in-school responsibilities for education and careers advice for young people. This links to the following consideration of how young people's HE aspiration was formed against a backdrop which required young people to navigate the performative priorities and hierarchies of stakeholders, in this case the school stakeholders.

6.3.5   navigating the priorities and hierarchies of stakeholders

Referring back to the conceptual framework, my research was focused on exploring the role of the school in shaping young people's formation of HE aspiration. During my fieldwork, I observed that school staff, who interacted daily with the young people, occasionally offered brief references to HE aspiration. In the following discussion I consider, In particular, how the school values and ethos, spearheaded by the staff members of the senior leadership team, shaped Amberley Grove's commitment to HE aspiration and also young people's own formations of HE aspiration in school.

The SLT's commitment to embedding institutional policy within the school, was demonstrated through the rollout of a complex reward system for pupils and staff. This policy was referenced within the vignettes of Eric and Jada, who interpreted it as an institutional measure of success in Amberley Grove. The policy expressed as a five letter acronym, signalled five attributes that Amberley Grove highlighted were qualities of good leaders; leadership qualities which the school expected the pupils to emulate. As one of the school's key policies, the values and ethos of Amberley Grove presented in the acronym,

acted as a measure of performance for staff and pupils. The policy had turned into something of a mantra within the school. As presented in their vignettes, Eric and Jada both reference the mantra; an acronym that has been adopted and referenced throughout Amberley Grove. It is not referenced explicitly here to maintain the anonymity of the school as the acronym is exclusive to the school and published on their media. In relation to the aspiration of the young people, this indicates that the acronym served as one example of how the priorities of the Amberley Grove senior leadership filter into young people's aspirations for the future. With the young people referencing the acronym in relation to their plans for the future, they outline that whilst it is aspirational, it is a standard which neither of them feel they meet. Not only that, but Amberley Grove jargon, like most institutional acronyms, is rarely understood beyond this institution. Pupils referring to the acronym seemed to be positively reinforced by using it within the Amberley Grove space; but it is unclear whether the reinforcement will continue outside Amberley Grove.

In addition to embedding institutional policy around leadership, the senior leadership team also organised partnerships with universities and companies which gave the young people opportunities to engage with HE study by hosting and promoting WP activities. The SLT were also ultimately responsible for subject provision and capacity within the school, which when cancelled, inadvertently shaped some of the young people's formation of HE aspiration. Vignettes of Gabby, Eric, Samuel, Jessica, Adam, Amanda, Mya, and Taylor for example, indicate how subject provision and the engagement with WP activities through "aspiration-raising" discourses - as referenced in the conceptual framework - shaped the young people's HE aspiration.

The school priorities also included the commitment to Widening Participation. As presented in the Findings chapter, during my time in the school, I observed the school's various references and activities related to Widening Participation. The school was particularly keen for the young people with high prior attainment to engage in activities around HE, had a variety of partnerships with regional universities and repeatedly promoted the aspiration to study at HE following compulsory education, to the "most-able, least-likely" young people. This indicates the position in the English context of aspiration as an institutional policy directive in which schools and colleges are now openly mandating priorities for future plans, as discussed in the Australian context by Gale and Parker (2015).

However, like Archer et al (2014), I am critical of the neutral role of institutional policy in guiding the HE aspirations of the high academic achieving young people. From my findings, I observed that this wider neo-liberal mandate for the promotion of attendance at university as HE aspiration, is the pinnacle of all aspiration, only reserved for the most privileged few (Gale and Parker, 2018). A narrow definition in Amberley Grove of HE aspiration was being passively, but assuredly, challenged by some of the young people. Year 9 young people attending the Widening Participation events off-campus, were less likely than the other young people to define any specific education or career trajectory. Whilst some young people articulated very precise career destinations in their dreams for the future, the Year 9 young people who had been selected to attend the university outreach events either articulated positive affirmations, uncertainties or even an adventure activity in their dreams for the future. The institution of Amberley Grove focused – or imposed – a performative directive for access to and sustained participation in HE, particularly the most selective institutions, for its "most-able, least-likely" young people, much like in Mirza and Meetoo's (2018) work. However, some of the young people refrained from outlining specific educational and career plans and adopted a critical approach to the significance of the activities and policies in their school.

Sometimes young people assessed the practicalities of an HE opportunity against their enjoyment of it and its deemed value, to determine whether it was for them. For example, Taylor decided that he no longer wished to attend the off-site Widening Participation event held at a local university; it was difficult for him to get there and he did not enjoy the event. Taylor discussed this personal decision to self-exclude from the activity with me, as the researcher. Here, Taylor echoed sentiments in work by Gale and Parker (2018), building on work by Bourdieu et al (1990), that he felt the event was just not for him. The practicalities of attending the event, which required his brother to drive him, also contributed to his reservations about it not being a place for him. He felt it was too remote, out of the way from his familiar surroundings and inconvenient. Research by Byrom (2009) indicated that many Widening Participation events were highly selective and their selection process was contributing to a failure to engage those who would not otherwise consider highly selective HE institutions. Taylor's experience of self-exclusion from a WP event suggested that the events may also be disincentivising some individuals further to attend events at particular institutions, and potentially attend the HE institution. WP events may have positive impacts on the young people's formation of their HE aspiration, but they may also have negative impacts. Taylor may have benefitted from an opportunity

to reflect on and discuss his experience of attending the WP event and navigating the unfamiliar surroundings with others, to support his formation of HE aspiration.

6.3.6   Summary

In this section I have discussed how the findings presented in the previous chapter define what HE aspiration is. I have considered how HE aspiration is in part, goal-driven plans for the future. One of the ways that this manifested in my research was through the young people's negotiation of the importance of home as an orientation to determine their future plans. The young people also presented their knowledge of HE. This often included a mis-match between curiosity about the options for their own HE aspirations and notions of the ideal applicant. In thinking about how self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept formed the young people's HE aspiration, I discussed the ability of some young people to wield their own agency, whilst navigating institutional pressures. In this research, cultural expectations and identities, were articulated by the young people as playing a relatively small role in shaping their HE aspirations. The discussion of past, present, future educational and career identities encompassed facets such as the recognition of underachievement in shaping young people's HE aspiration, alongside the dilemma of choosing subjects at GCSE as a key step for these young people in the formation of their HE aspirations. Finally, HE aspiration for these young people was found to include navigating priorities and hierarchies of school stakeholders.

This discussion covered the impact of school values and the performative nature of the WP sphere in broadening and narrowing the young people's HE aspiration. I explored how HE aspiration manifests through a variety of aspects in Amberley Grove, not specifically detailed in the conceptual framework. This underscores the need to have an evolving definition of HE aspiration in school. This is because it is continuously shaped by the individual young person, amongst their classmates, within their school, and also in response to changing institutional, regional and national priorities for HE. Reflecting on the conceptual framework above, the upcoming third section of this chapter focuses on answering the other two research questions. These questions are related in particular, to finding out how individuals, classmates and the school discuss HE aspiration and how these discussions and interactions shape the formation of HE aspiration. The following section draws on the conceptual framework to discuss how

individual young people's HE aspiration was shaped by conversations with their classmates and in response to school staff and priorities.

6.4 Young people's discussions in School around HE aspiration

In this third section I discuss how young people engage with people in the school about their HE aspiration and what this suggests about the role that others in school may play in young people's formation of HE aspiration. It draws on the conceptual framework to discuss how the individual young person interacts with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates, as well as their interactions with their school including its policy, . It discusses the research questions:

- How do these young people discuss and interact about their HE aspirations, with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and within their school?
- How do these classmates and their school play a role in the young people's formations of HE aspirations?

6.4.1 Individuals and Classmates

This sub-section discusses my observations of interactions and discussions between various individuals and their classmates, throughout the research, around their formation of their HE aspirations.

For Amanda and Mya, for example, their strong friendship meant that they were rarely seen apart. This also extended to the widening participation and other extra-curricular activities that the school hosted and recommended. The girls' partnership resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship in which both individuals in the duo benefitted from the extra-curricular opportunities of the other. They were best-friends and this did not go unnoticed by any of the classmates nor staff. The girls were invited and assumed to be enrolled in the same activities throughout their time in school. Having spent such a significant amount of time together in school, as well as out of school, they had access to similar information and attended the same WP events; they had access to much of the same information about HE. This shaped the formation of their HE aspiration, as their HE aspiration was interpreted by each of the girls as being equal. They initially considered that they had the same motivators and

significance of their educational milestones. Neither saw it fit to articulate their career nor educational aspiration. This was related to the agency and self-confidence of the girls, but also seemed to be also born out of a pact between them to articulate working hard. This also may have minimised any competitive hierarchies within their close friendship, that seemed to be discussed at great length within the discussions of the wider "most-able, least-likely" group.

Brooks (2003b) considers the role of friends and peers on the HE choices of young people. Brooks found that the young people in her research hardly spoke with their classmates about their HE choices, but that the young people created hierarchies of HE choices. They became increasingly reluctant to share their HE plans and began to identify their peers as potential competitors for their own HE choices. Brooks focuses her research on the experiences of 16 to 18 year olds, but my research, which explores the HE aspirations of young people aged between 11-14, suggests that pervasive hierarchies around subject choice are constructed and observed much earlier. In discussing how Mya and Amanda formed their HE aspiration, their friendship shaped the access they had to HE information. With access to each other's networks and opportunities, each girl had the opportunity to double their chances to discuss, develop and re-articulate their HE aspiration.

In contrast, Eric and Samuel's friendship was marred by the educational hierarchies and the competitiveness that GCSE choices brought , in Amberley Grove. Despite his prior attainment, Samuel was not invited to attend many of the WP opportunities. Also, despite being the only pupil preferring Science, he was not invited to study the Triple Science GCSE course; the qualification seen by many of the young people as the gateway to a Science future. This contrasted with Eric who declined invitations to participate in educational and extra-curricular activities at Amberley Grove. This created a friction between the two in an exchange presented around access to Triple Science. This demonstrated how - for Samuel – he felt excluded, where Eric felt empowered to decline. The exclusion from Triple Science and from his classmates impacted the self-confidence of Samuel and whilst his likes and dislikes were aligned with his aspirations, he lacked confidence in his attainment. This supports work by Mazenod et al (2019) that suggests that self-confidence plays a role in the formation of HE aspiration. Samuel's confidence may have been detrimentally impacted by the discussions held with his classmates. For Samuel, his HE aspiration was impacted by the fleeting comments of another pupil, but it indicated

that Samuel's HE aspiration was formed in line with how included, confident and empowered he felt within a space.

Findings in section 5.3.1.6 around the self-confidence and self-concept of the young people, indicated that these were often accompanied by recurrent need for reassurance and positive reinforcement. Taylor also demonstrated the importance of confidence and reinforcements from classmates in forming HE aspirations. I observed him explicitly disregard a future career path, as a result of what appeared to be a lack of positive affirmation from his classmates. In this scenario for Taylor, by discounting a possible career aspiration, he reconsidered a potential plan for the future as a fleeting hypothetical utterance that he could subsequently disregard. Taylor's case indicated that whilst HE aspirations may be detailed and goal driven, they may also be momentary, and undergo sporadic evolution and re-articulation. Taylor appeared to be questioning whether the career paths were for the likes of him, with early self-exclusion removing the possibility of any rejection - or affirmation - of his HE aspirations by his classmates. St Clair and Benjamin (2011), found that peer and wider social interactions offer young people feedback on their aspirations. The negligible feedback that Taylor received may have reinforced Taylor's rationale for rejecting the potential career pathway.

6.4.2   Individuals and The School

The role of the school in shaping these young people's HE aspiration largely appeared to occur through direct staff engagement with the young people, or indirectly through a series of extra-curricular activities, discussions and presentations around the values and priorities of Amberley around HE aspiration, or through the institutional structures which impacted their educational progression, for example through subject choices.

In forming her HE aspirations, Jessica was re-invigorated in the group discussion around questions about university, by the prospect of exploring art and design options in university and having the opportunity to follow a similar career path as her classmates. Up until that point, Jessica was growing increasingly detached from her education as she felt she was inhabiting an educational space that did

not reflect her. She was focused on the future and could not wait to get out of Amberley Grove. For Jessica, her HE aspiration was formed as a fractious relationship between her goal-driven plans for the future and the narrow, performative presentation of HE aspiration by Amberley Grove. The realisation that she would not need to be an outcast in the "most-able, least-likely" group presented a shift in her considerations of university and HE. That said, Jessica remained critical of the school factory and of the education system more widely; for Jessica, it facilitates social- engineering. The opportunity to implement social change through her 'big events' and through her HE aspiration also aligned with how Jessica formed her HE aspiration. Overall, Jessica's HE aspiration aligns with Hoskins and Barker's (2017) finding that young people's HE aspirations barely resembled the policy discourse around HE aspirations.

However, in contrast to Jessica above and concurring with findings by St Clair and Benjamin (2011), it appears that Jada formed her HE aspiration as a reiteration of what she believed she should do. Be that through outlining the school mantra or through her subject choices, Jada articulated her HE aspiration as it linked to the institutional priorities of Amberley Grove. This suggests that some young people, rather than form their HE aspiration as a self-reflective internal process, construct it through a process of articulation and re-articulation of institutional mantras and their notion of the ideal applicant.

Similarly, Rita was keen to adopt appropriate HE aspirations. Rita was family-oriented and she valued the role of her familial connections in shaping and guiding her HE aspiration. Despite being self-assured, in relation to her HE aspirations, Rita's career plans changed throughout the course of my fieldwork. She was also an advocate for social change and keen to combat discrimination. The changes and references that Rita made to her career choices, indicate that Rita's moral compass as well as her familial and institutional influence, helped form her HE aspirations. Wong (2012) proposes that identity performativity may interfere with girls' science engagement and aspirations for their future and appear to be shaped by family, peer and teacher expectations. I suggest that for Rita, identity performativity was not limiting her science engagement specifically, but that it was guiding her future career choices. In shifting her career choice from head teacher to engineer, Rita signalled her dad's recommendation in her most recent career choice, but also demonstrated a popular career path throughout Amberley Grove. The institutional priority at Amberley Grove of Engineering was

demonstrated through Samuel's indication of his career choice and teachers mentioning it as a possible career path for the pupils, as well as it being the focus of the WP event hosted in the school, which all of the Year 9 "most-able, least-likely" young people were required to attend. Presenting Engineering as an institutional priority associated with HE aspiration in Amberley Grove, creates tensions for supporting HE aspirations for careers in science, rather than from science, for individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds, as discussed by Wong (2015).

In forming her HE aspiration, Rose indicated the importance of a career advice questionnaire suggesting that she may choose the career of a doctor in the future. It held great weight for Rose and even directed her aspiration. However, it illuminated to me that whilst in Rose's case, the results of the questionnaire for her were positive, the results were not accompanied by a debrief nor any critical guidance. It was quite possible that many young people may have received an unfavourable career suggestion and may have felt disheartened, confused or deterred by it. They may also use the career suggestion results as confirmatory or deterministic. In this case, it was important that careers advice was not limited to a superficial multiple choice questionnaire, but that it was also combined with accurate, informative and critical guidance. Moote and Archer (2018) advocate for impartial advice to all young people, which at present is potentially reproducing disparities and unequal trends in careers and HE access in relation to gender, ethnicity and social class. The engagement and evolving development of the young people's HE aspirations in this research, as well as their re-articulations of HE aspiration, provided a strong rebuttal to notions that these young people suffer from a poverty of aspiration. The multiple features and resources that young people such as Jessica, Rose and Rita drew upon in their formations of their HE aspiration challenge deficit narratives of HE aspiration for those "least-likely". This concurred with research by Law, Finney and Swann (2014) who counter any notions that young people are universally disengaged in fulfilling their HE aspirations. However, their insights demonstrate that there may also be an opportunity to provide intersectional and impartial approaches to careers information, advice and guidance which may help to acknowledge the heterogeneity of pupils' plans for the future and counteract institutional bias.

6.4.3   Summary

This section has demonstrated how young people's discussions with their school and other classmates mitigate the formation of HE aspiration. The final sub-section of this chapter discusses how the methodological approach used in this research sought to counter deficit narratives of "most-able, least-likely" young people.

6.5   Countering deficit narratives of young people's HE aspiration

The literature review discusses a complex backdrop of factors that positions young people such as those in this study as "most able but least-likely" to participate in highly selective universities. These included the rates of free-school meal eligibility in their school (Crawford, 2014), the relatively low HE participation rates of the school and the neighbourhood where the young people lived (Harrison & McCaig, 2015), and the minority ethnic backgrounds of the young people which indicate that they are less likely to progress to high tariff HE institutions (Explore Education Statics, 2021). In an effort to reconsider HE aspiration for these young people outside of a deficit narrative, towards a multi-layered complex concept, the conceptual framework presents HE aspiration as an evolving concept that is situated as external to the young people. The conceptual framework presents HE aspiration as a concept which arguably, transcends an internal process of individualised agency and goals for the future to demonstrate how it is also shaped by conversations with classmates, alongside school staff and school priorities.

Burke (2009) and Harrison & Waller (2018) highlighted how patronising WP discourse is , by - amongst other things - continuing to imply that some are lacking aspiration. My research findings suggest that young people are not deficient in aspirations, and that these "most-able, least-likely" young people are in fact required to navigate and articulate complex aspects in forming their HE aspirations, which are difficult to uncover through traditional WP research methodologies. Drawing on the methodological and epistemological considerations of the conceptual framework, this sub-section discusses how the methodological approach challenged notions that young people's formation of HE aspiration was an entirely individualised process, but instead was also formed in discussion with their

classmates, and shaped by complex school priorities. I argue that over time, the methods used in this research, allowed for the exploration of findings around HE aspiration that moved away from simplistic considerations of whether individuals would like to attend university.

Firstly, the methodological approach and conceptual framework allowed the researcher to consider how classmates and school may play a role in young people's formations of HE aspiration. Using group discussions to explore HE aspiration as a multi-faceted amalgamation of goal-driven plans for the future, enabled young people to interact with each other about possible future experiences; spaces that are currently inaccessible to many young people. Only those who maintained consistent academic performance were afforded the opportunity to inhabit spaces to discuss their HE aspirations beyond participation in HE. Even those who had prior academic attainment that indicated they may be likely to succeed in HE (Crawford, 2014), if they were potentially underachieving relative to their prior attainment, were limited in their outlets to explore their HE aspiration. The group discussions that I facilitated offered an opportunity for the young people as a group, to have a space to explore the aspects of HE aspiration that they felt were relevant and important to its formation. They also provided contexts to explore how group hierarchies between the young people dictated the direction of the conversations and how HE aspiration was formed.

The group hierarchies that were uncovered during the course of the research, were also discussed in work by Brooks (2003b). Similar to Brooks, I found that the young people did not talk at great length with their classmates about their HE aspirations, and that hierarchical structures existed amongst the young people and may have been exacerbated through discussions around HE aspirations. In an effort to combat the existing and evolving "most-able, least-likely" group hierarchies that made some reluctant to disclose their formations of HE aspiration, I also gave the young people opportunities to write and illustrate features of their HE aspiration, through activities shaped by the evolving definition of HE aspiration and my fieldwork. By using a variety of media to explore HE and aspiration to it with the young people, I helped to facilitate spaces where the young people felt more confident to share and discuss important features of their HE aspirations, and have their voices listened to.

Through my observations of the school and with the young people, I was able to identify and moreover, explore beneath, the institutional preoccupation with the performativity of HE. I discussed with the

young people what was important for them to know about HE and observed mis-alignments between the school's provision of information around HE and how this was translated to the young people as resources. The presentation of HE in the school's media and around the building, indicated that the school were keen to portray HE participation as a trajectory to be celebrated and promoted. By providing these "most-able, least-likely" young people with the opportunity to engage with some educational and career paths that were linked to HE, Amberley Grove provided what they believed was space to engage with HE and the aspiration to it. However, in doing so, Amberley Grove ascribed a deficit positioning for the young people and failed to recognise the complex hierarchical dynamics that were at play in the formation of the young people's HE aspiration. The school assumed a neutral transference of information about HE study and career plans in neutral spaces, to eagle-eyed young people. The school was relying on what Brooks (2003b:255) refers to as "a cascade model of information flow".

Harman (2017) draws on work by Ranciere (1991), Friere (1996) and Bourdieu (1998) to challenge any simple view which positions HE participation as an intuitively emancipatory process. Like Harman (2017), I argue that the formation and development of HE aspiration for the young people is not an automatically empowering process. The availability of information around HE for these young people, required the support, navigation and evolving reflection of their classmates, their school and invested others, to effectively align their knowledge with their agency, self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. In addition, the hierarchical systems in place shaped these young people's choices, university hierarchies and regional access. The context in which they were required to navigate these decisions (Roberts, 2009), reinforces the complexities of forming HE aspiration. Conducting research observations, I was able to observe Amberley Grove-mandated activities related to HE and careers both on and off-site, in the media and the discussions between the young people. These aspects of young people's HE aspiration would have not been as easily observable through other data collection methods.

This approach offers a challenge to the wider discipline of Widening Participation to broaden the methodologies used to research with individuals, for example by using interactive activities and group discussions. The methodological and conceptual framework are underpinned by a commitment to recognise that young people, their knowledge and experiences are value-adding to research processes

and the wider canon. This builds on epistemologies and methodologies driven in work by Mayall, (2000) and Mannay, (2016), who emphasise the importance of privileging, rather than diminishing, the voices of children and young people in research and wider society. It also supports epistemological and methodological approaches to research that encourage young people to be active contributors to research knowledge, as also presented in findings by Uprichard (2010). By using interactive activities and group discussions, alongside observations, I sought to document how young people can form their HE aspirations beyond the performative expectations of their school. These activities aimed to broaden institutional knowledge and challenge assumptions and stereotypes of HE aspiration, ultimately moving away from deficit narratives where those "most-able, least-likely" are unempowered and inadequate, without the institution of HE.

These deficit narratives were largely held by the school and the staff. They were demonstrated through the way that some of the young people were encouraged to visit and engage with HE institutions and careers pathways. I would argue that the school did not accompany the HE engagement with a critical space for the young people to explore their HE aspirations. This was despite the governmental directive to offer unbiased careers education, information, advice and guidance. Rather, in these situations, the school may have been moderating a strategic game of student recruitment on behalf of regional institutions. The young people formed their HE aspirations against a societal backdrop of power struggles for control of assets and influence, as explored by Webb et al (2017), developing from Bourdieu (1986)'s work.

However, from the findings, the young people appeared to be beginning to challenge their position within the marketisation approach to HE. My approach to data collection around HE aspiration suggested that even at 13 and 14, the young people were asserting their agency to abstain from pressures to articulate their specific HE and career paths. They also highlighted the suffocating and pressurised environment that they were existing in at school, and identified that school did not have the monopoly on education and that education also existed outside the boundaries of the "prison"-like school walls, suggested by Adam, Jessica and Gabby. The young people's ability to identify and navigate the institutional and social pressures on their HE aspirations, despite their school's lack of recognition of the marketisation climate that the young people were making decisions about HE within,

suggests that they were becoming aware of the challenges to the formation of their HE aspirations. This presents one of the ways in which this research and the young people themselves are seeking to subvert the damaging deficit narrative of those "least-likely".

6.5.1   Summary

This subsection has discussed how, over time, the methodological approach and the methods used were key to exploring young people's HE aspiration beyond an intention to attend HE. They also provided research opportunities to problematise HE aspiration and develop a re-conceptualisation of the concept, illuminated by knowledge of the young people. It challenged notions that young people were deficient of HE aspiration and that their formation of HE aspiration was an entirely individualised process. Instead, I discussed how it was also formed in discussion with their classmates, and shaped by complex school priorities. The upcoming, final chapter concludes how the research answers the main research question and supports the conceptual framework; it considers and reflects on the research journey, outlines the contribution to knowledge as well as the limitations of the research, and provides some recommendations for future research.

7   Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the research, exploring how the findings answer the main research question and align with the conceptual framework.   I reflect on my often tumultuous journey as a researcher and outline the contribution to knowledge that I have made through   this thesis. I briefly outline the limitations of my research and provide some recommendations for future research.

7.1   Answering my Research Questions

There is a breadth of academic literature, policy and institutional practice that explores HE aspiration. Having reviewed the literature on WP around HE aspiration, much of the contemporary UK widening participation (WP) research explored young people's HE aspiration, either offered a somewhat superficial, binary definition of HE aspiration or positioned HE aspiration as fixed and finite across time. Some social researchers even occasionally failed to define HE aspiration and assume a universal understanding of the concept in their empirical research. These factors presented ontological and epistemological constraints on WP research into young people's HE aspiration and how it may be formed by young people and the role of their school and classmates in shaping their HE aspiration.

The literature, examples of which are discussed in section 2.3 of this thesis, demonstrate that aspects of HE aspiration are drawn from a variety of social scientific traditions and political underpinnings. As such, I set out to combine these diverse aspects to develop a multi-layered definition of HE aspiration. In using this definition, I sought to explore what was happening for young people in their school, I was particularly interested to hear the voices of those who were traditionally less likely to enter highly selective institutions. My thesis asked:

 How is Higher Education aspiration formed by "most-able, least-likely" young people in their school?

In an effort to move away from a deficit lens most emphasised in political and practice discourses around HE aspiration, whilst recognising the importance of these approaches and academic research

to defining HE aspiration, I problematised the concept of HE aspiration. From the literature review of HE aspiration and young people "most-able, least-likely", I drew together a relatively broad definition of HE aspiration: *goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012); young people's knowledge of HE; interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014); levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education.*

Figure 9 - The conceptual framework of how young people's HE aspiration is formed in school
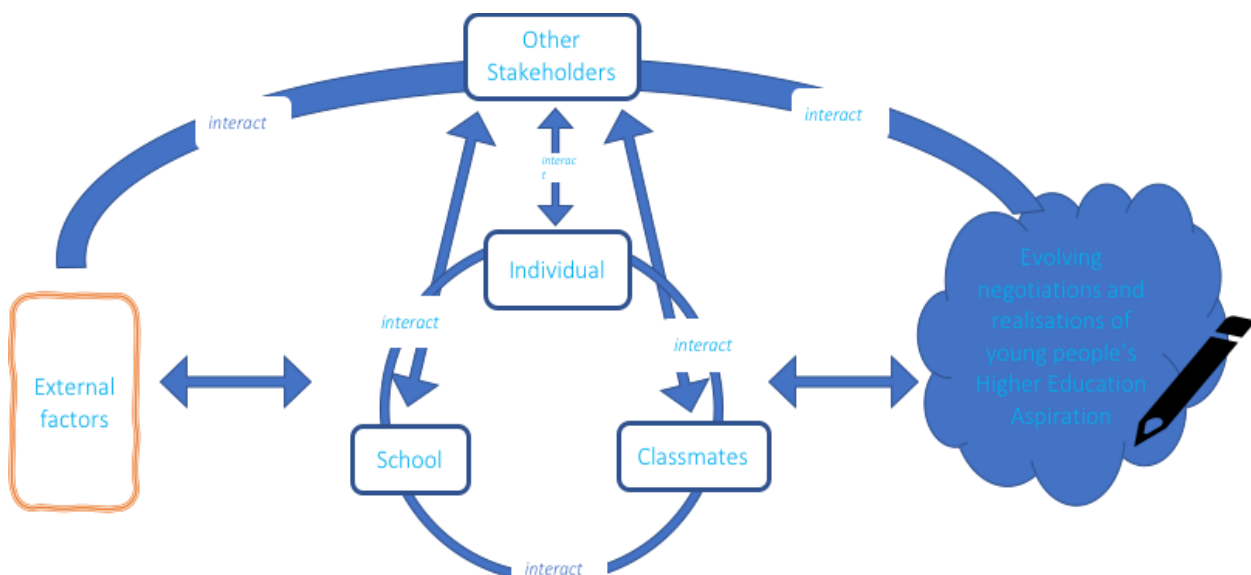
I constructed a conceptual framework, indicated in Figure 9, which situated individual young people as active contributors to the evolving conceptualisation of HE aspiration, alongside others, particularly in their school. To explore the main question further, I conducted group discussions, interactive activities and observations with the young people through an ethnographic case study approach to explore:

- What is Higher Education aspiration for "most-able, least-likely" young people in this school?

…to find out how this definition would be shaped by the YP in the field

- How do these young people discuss and interact about their HE aspirations, with their "most-able, least-likely" classmates and within their school?

…to understand how these young people broadly discuss HE aspiration

- How do these classmates and their school play a role in the YP's formations of HE aspirations?

… to explore the daily interactions and school dynamics that play a role in shaping it

In answer to my main research question, I found that HE aspiration for these young people largely built on and expanded the definition proposed in my thesis and that HE aspiration was formed in school by these "most-able, least-likely" young people in the following ways.

Firstly, this research indicates that the conceptual framework of how young people form HE aspiration in Amberley Grove school may be expanded for example to disaggregate the School as a singular entity. Rather the School could be separately considered as teaching staff, HE students, the senior leadership and school media. Whilst, the role and impact of these on the young people varied, they impacted the manner in which the teaching staff formed HE aspiration and consequently relayed and engaged with the young people about HE. These shape the formations of the individual young people as well those of their classmates. The revised conceptual framework is indicated in Figure 10 and presents how HE aspiration was formed by these young people in school.
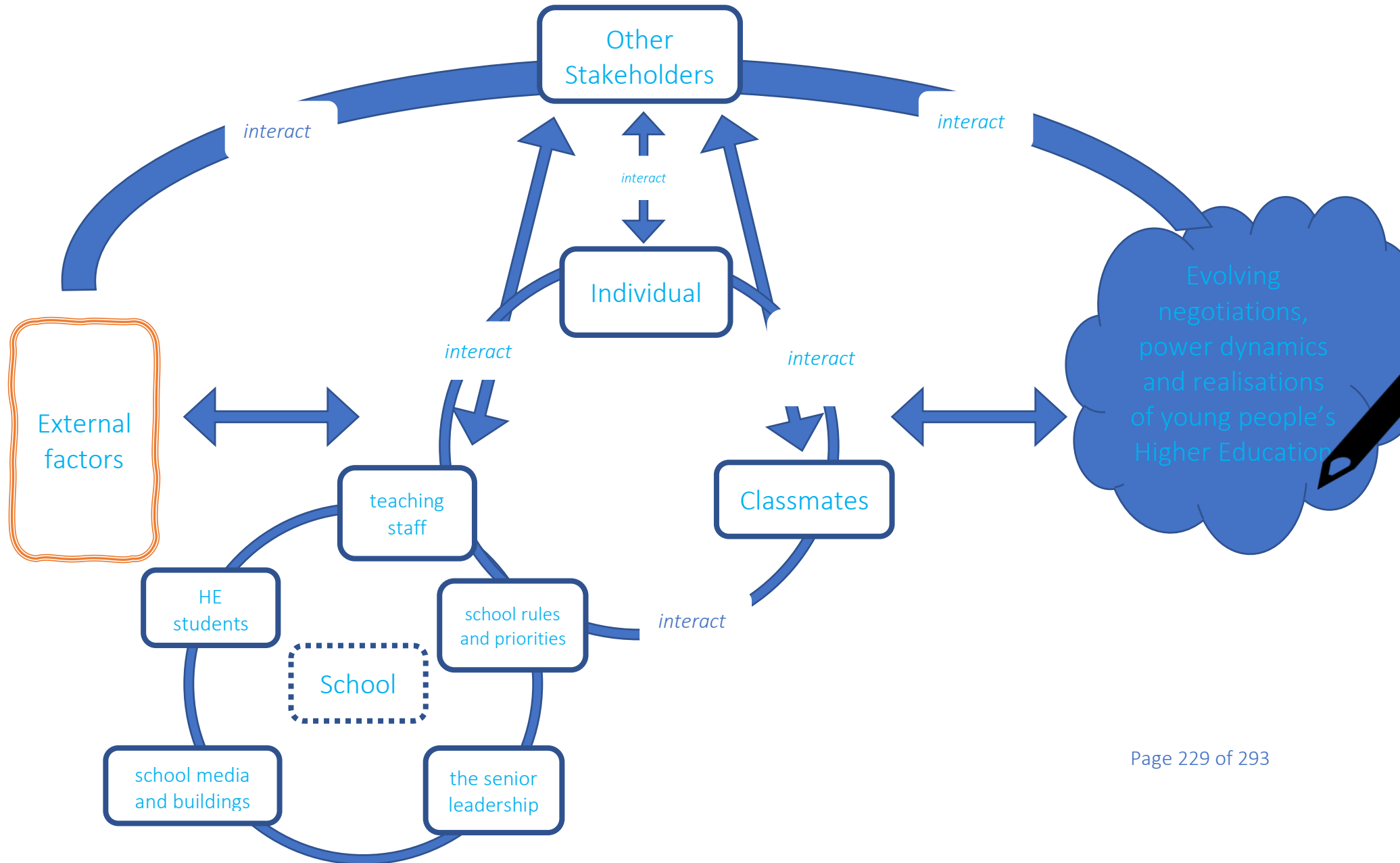
Secondly, HE aspiration constantly evolved for these young people. Reflecting on the conceptual framework, individual young people interacted with their classmates and alongside staff and school values and policies about HE aspiration. HE aspiration was articulated by the individual, but also represented an embedded and complex concept for these young people that was shaped by a variety of factors in school. It rarely formed the basis of whole conversations or sustained interactions with and between young people. Rather, plans to attend university were most often discussed in school sporadically and in passing, both positively and negatively by young people, and in relation to other topics around HE aspiration.

In addition, HE aspiration encompassed goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012) and was linked to young people's knowledge of HE. The young people made decisions on their educational plans based on limited, largely anecdotal and rarely evolving careers and educational information and advice and guidance from their school, their family, friends and older, familiar peer "role models". Their knowledge of HE was underdeveloped at this point, although they showed an awareness of HE hierarchies by referencing Oxford and Cambridge within their knowledge of HE. The access to HE and careers information advice and guidance varied between the young people and was shaped by the school's priorities for their subject choices. The findings also suggest that gaps in the availability and accessibility of careers education, information, advice and guidance for those from ethnic minority backgrounds as identified in the literature for example by Mirza and Meetoo (2018) were replicated in this "most-able, least-likely" group.

Furthermore, their HE aspiration interacted with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities and was also shaped by their levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. These included their varying importance of home, their plans for the future, their emerging commitments to social justice and the importance of their cultural identities. These were discussed amongst the young people in relation to their HE aspiration, and for some served as familiar reference points for anchoring and forming their HE aspiration.

Moreover, the young people talked about going to university in relation to other concepts - such as careers, academic capabilities, academic subject and extra-curricular interests, academic and

additional plans for the future, subject choices, previous awards and records of achievement, cultural expectations, educational self-efficacy and social responsibilities. The young people loosely ranked their HE aspiration against those of their classmates. These rankings were broadly based on prior academic attainment, presumed superiority of young people's current and future subject choices and the YP's engagement with school, WP and extracurricular activities. Their prior, current and future attainment and academic options, particularly in their GCSE choices and study, served as a pivotal point for the young people in beginning to form their HE aspiration. The rankings shaped how they saw the feasibility of their own educational aspirations.

Finally, for the young people, their HE aspiration was also formed by navigating priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders within their school whilst discussing and re-articulating their plans for the future beyond compulsory education. The compounded school priorities and hierarchies sometimes presented challenges for the young people in realising their plans for the future. However well-meaning, features of school life impacted some young people's self-actualisation of their HE aspiration formation and their ability to enact their self-agency or determination of their HE aspiration. These included features such as school and government structures, policies and practices, for example curriculum choice, timetable design, pupil leadership hierarchies and WP activities selection. They also included staff and wider school representations, knowledges and assumptions of HE and aspirations to it for young people, such as staff's own educational progression routes, billboards of HE participants and destinations. It also included staff knowledges and preconceptions about educational priorities and capabilities of the young people such as invitations to subject participation, and assumptions that young people from certain academic and/or cultural backgrounds are inclined or interested in particular subjects.

Overall, the HE aspiration of these young people was formed in their school in a crucible of discussions around pupil hierarchies, personal reflections about their goals for the future, both driven in large part by past, present and future academic choices and preferences. Their HE aspirations were constantly evolving and shaped in response to the school priorities.

7.2   PhD Reflections

Nearly 25 years on from a seminal report on inequality and further education by Baroness Helena Kennedy (1997), I argue through my research that more still needs to be done to understand what we mean by aspiration and that a good start would be to ask young people themselves.

Having read the report at the start of my PhD, it made for pretty damning reading. Throughout , Baroness Kennedy draws on data of dwindling further education budgets and national literacy and numeracy rates, which had plateaued. She highlights evidence that those with good academic outcomes are more likely to seek additional education and on-the job training, potentially further boosting their employment options. She explains that the stark reality in the UK is "if at first you don't succeed... you don't succeed!" However, she suggests it is not all doom and gloom. To challenge the harrowing statistics, she places her wholehearted support behind the further education sector and life-long learning, with its ability to offer flexible learning opportunities and transform lives.

Twelve years on from Kennedy's report, a 17-year-old black teenager, four months pregnant with a string of A and A* GCSE grades, turns up glazy-eyed at a further education college with her mum. Having been strongly nudged out of her all-girls grammar school – today, we would call it off-rolling – she entered, reluctantly, what would become her educational home for the next two years.

It was their fourth college visit that morning and they had both lost count of the number of sixth form college phone hold music they'd heard in 24 hours. Hardly any would comfortably enrol her two weeks into Year 13. But this fourth college felt different, awe-inspiring even… with its ten-storey high glass front. From the moment they walked through the huge automatic doors, the staff could not help them enough. Without any further delay, she was enrolled. Speaking with her new tutors about her work so far, they made it clear she was expected at college on Monday, timetable in hand.

This was the start of two further years at college. In that time, she faced some of the hardest challenges of her life; top of the list, becoming a mum. But beyond A-Level content, college more generally taught her an invaluable lesson about educational success: it isn't always linear. Armed with this knowledge, alongside the confidence, hard work and support from a multitude of friends and family, she completed her A-Levels and degree in 'quick' succession.

By graduation, she'd become intrigued by the very idea of education. This intrigue quickly developed into a vocational passion, with her first role whilst at university working for an education charity, managing tutors to support young people in their exams. She combined her regular day job with being a volunteer advocate. The ups and downs, phone hold tones and troubleshooting she had navigated during her years as teenage mum and a single student parent living 100 miles from home, had given her useful insights in overcoming challenges. As an advocate, she offered guidance on accessing services and directing service-users to vocational and educational training to develop their independence. Juggling these two roles, she set up a tutoring school. She hoped it would be one with a difference; a space which promoted a love of learning, developed young people's empowerment and their inquisitive minds by giving them the opportunity to construct their own learning activities with their tutors, in and out of the classroom. As a young parent, she also got involved in my daughter's school as a member of the Parents Association and after leaving the charity soon secured a graduate position in the Department for Education.

But everywhere this young mum turned, educationalists are talking about aspiration. They talked of investing time and money in 'raising aspirations' for 'disadvantaged groups'. Much of this language suggested that these young people are intrinsically lacking in some way; it inadvertently blamed and individualised the issues. The reports and the media suggested that individuals are deficient, at fault or were failures if they did not flourish in education, rather than highlighting the structural barriers that young people faced.

However, along her journey through formal education, she continued to meet, support and sometimes even had to watch, many of her fellow young parents scramble to get out of a cycle that constantly hindered their undoubtedly high aspirations for themselves and their children. They continued to be some of the hardest-working and resilient people she'd met. The mantra, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again!' just did not seem to quite fit with this young mum's observations. Furthermore, it seemed that every layperson knew about education and aspiration; so she began to take a more critical approach to education asking what young people really aspire to do. By the time she'd started her PhD, she was thinking less like a practitioner and more like a theorist. She'd started to ask questions like: what actually is aspiration and who gets to decide? What can young people themselves tell us about what individuals might want to do when they leave school? And do many individuals really have

'low' aspirations?

Rather than just conducting a survey asking people whether they would like to go to university, she detailed young people's aspirations, observing how they form and discuss these in everyday life. The detail was important; researchers know relatively little about what shapes young people's aspirations in areas where poverty rates are high and where the number of pupils going to university remains low. The young people taught her a lot about what it means to aspire to HE, what challenges they encounter and what shapes these HE aspirations.

Thinking back to that forlorn teenager sat with her mum in the school office, where the head of the grammar school's sixth told them that "girls at our school don't have babies", it makes you wonder what her aspirations were for that teenage mum. Did these clash with those that the young woman had for herself? That teacher almost certainly thought that individuals had one shot at their future, and that if at first they did not succeed, they never would. In case you were still wondering, that forlorn teenager was me.

My HE journey has been a complex one. You could argue that the odds of that forlorn teenager were somewhat stacked… and not really in my favour! I was least-likely to participate in university, achieve a good degree, study at post-graduate level and pursue a research career. When I began this research, it was in an effort to unpack the rarely problematised concept of HE aspiration and understand how young people aspire. However, I finished this research with the sole grit and determination to share a small part of the complex stories of young people which often go untold.

7.3   Research Contributions

This research offers the following four main research contributions.

- To challenge the current framing of HE aspiration as merely an individualised process

Young people in school learn daily in groups. These groups enable them to engage, discuss, challenge, discard and (re-)construct their own and their classmates' knowledge. They develop knowledge and queries in groups, not in silos. This research suggests that HE aspiration is no different. However, few studies exploring WP acknowledge this methodologically, instead researchers most often ask individuals directly about their own personal HE aspiration. This has two main impacts on our subsequent theorising and conceptualising of HE aspiration: it situates the responsibility for HE aspiration at the feet of the individual by positioning it as an individualised concept, as well as diminishing the impact of discussion and institutional structure culture on shaping an individual's HE aspiration. Nevertheless, my research finds that young people engage, discuss, challenge, discard and (re-)construct their own and their "most-able, least-likely" classmates HE aspiration, in a sporadic, yet evolving process. It supports Appadurai (2004) in suggesting that aspiration is "formed in interaction and in the thick of social life".

- To urge a national and institutional re-think of current WP initiatives that fundamentally frame the individual as deficient and "lacking what it takes"

 Young people, like those within this research who lived in a multi-ethnic area of the UK with relatively high socio-economic deprivation, and relatively low progression to HE, are often too easily framed as deficient, problematic and docile in WP practice and discourse. Experiences of disadvantage, adversity and poverty negatively impact educational experiences and progression. However, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences are the problem, not the individual. My findings offer counter-arguments to narratives that label these young people as deficient in relation to HE aspiration. These young people aged 11-14, had high-prior attainment and demonstrated complex formations and negotiations of their HE aspiration, shaped by school discussions and dynamics.

- To promote innovative and creative methodologies in WP research, which position the participant as "value-adding" and "important"

This research used a mixed method approach and a nuanced conceptual framework. This facilitated a research shift away from an emphasis on what these young people's HE aspiration lacked, towards considerations on how their interactions shape their aspiration. It also enabled me to utilise creative data collection methods that the young people found to be enjoyable and engaging. Whilst doing this, it also presented an approach to Widening Participation research which was participant-centred and methodologically rigorous. The young people thoroughly enjoyed the process and they valued this opportunity as a space to be listened to when discussing the formation of their HE aspirations. The data collection methods were fun and engaging; this made the research less of a chore, or like schoolwork, for the young people. Thus, many of the young people were eager to continue participating beyond the end of my fieldwork. The young people's definition and formations of HE aspiration were complex and multi-faceted. Their formation of HE aspiration contributes to a national and institutional re-think of Higher Education Aspiration and Widening Participation research that methodologically values the participants' contributions.

- To emphasise the heterogeneous nature of those "most-able, least-likely"

Often research exploring young people, at such intersections as ethnicity and socio-economic disadvantage, overlooks the nuances of the individuals and implies that they are a monolith. In fact, this "most-able, least-likely" group was complex. Throughout my time in their school, I was able to observe and discuss how their HE aspirations evolved and changed amongst the group, but also for individuals. They came from various ethnic backgrounds, with some having direct familial links to HE, through sibling attendance or parental participation. All of the young people demonstrated that HE aspiration could be defined alongside this thesis' definition of HE aspiration. However, the young people also had diverse conversations and interactions around HE aspiration, which contributed in a variety of ways to each of their individual and evolving formations of HE aspiration.

7.4   Considering the limitations

This section considers the main limitations of my research approach to exploring how the young people formed their HE aspirations and recommendations for future research. This research involved the facilitation of interactive research activities around HE. This may have primed the young people to consider and explore HE aspiration more than they would have otherwise. However, whilst this may present one limitation, this research was interested to find out how HE aspiration is formed by individuals as well as in conversation with their classmates and school. It developed insights into other ways to consider HE aspiration, that rebut the lingering deficit narrative of these young people and their HE aspiration as lacking. This research offered the chance to understand how young people can illuminate definitions of HE aspirations and the complex formations of the concept. It showed that their HE aspirations are complex, evolving, and that they are not intrinsically lacking but that structures around them, perpetuate subject hierarchies and institutional priorities shape how the young people must negotiate and articulate their HE aspiration.

In addition, this research was subject to the limitations of the ethnographic case study approach. Writings by Sim (2018), who conducted an ethnographic study of how young people construct the future, echoed my feelings of helplessness in school during my ethnographic case study. Whilst I conducted my research, I struggled to express my intermittent frustration and powerlessness as a researcher in the school, exploring young people's HE aspiration. My observations were inevitably subjective and undoubtedly shaped by my need to negotiate my position as black female researcher, a non-traditional student, a parent and confidante, amongst other identities. However, I often felt powerless to redress classroom discussions and school policies that inadvertently impacted some young people's self-confidence and self-efficacy and shaped the formation of their HE aspirations.

As a single case study, the findings could not be directly generalised beyond the Amberley Grove "most-able, least-likely". However, the findings present interesting learning for the field of WP research. These are explored in greater depth in the contribution to knowledge section in 7.3. As a case study, it demonstrated that whilst the findings reflected a nuanced context that could offer some consideration for conceptualising the formation of HE aspiration in other contexts, both the

ethnographic case study approach and the use of creative data collection methods to explore a complex concept such as young people's HE aspiration, illuminated the exploration of the concept. This could prove useful for the field of WP research.

To build on this single case study, I intend to develop future research, which explores differences and similarities around HE aspiration. Using a comparative case study approach, I could explore, for example, the HE aspirations of girls compared with boys or across different types of schools.

The following section builds on the key findings and discussion and further reflects on the limitations to present recommendations for future research. .

7.5   Recommendations

This section presents some recommendations for future academic research, particularly in the field of Widening Participation.

Firstly, as discussed previously, the methods and conceptual framework enabled me to move away from the emphasis on individual HE aspiration. Using discussions and interactive activities, I could facilitate spaces where young people could explore HE aspiration in addition to their daily classroom conversations. These methods repositioned the dialogue around HE aspiration away from an individualistic perspective, to a concept that continues to be formed by individuals in discussion with their classmate and school contexts. From this approach, I would recommend that WP research reconsiders whose voice is heard in research. Limited research speaks with children and young people about their own experiences of HE, meaning that their voices are rarely considered within policy-making and conceptualisation of WP. This deepens the misalignments between institutions and the young people. In these situations, policies are unlikely to reflect any of the priorities of the young people and interventions are done to, rather for and with them. I urge WP researchers and practitioners to also speak with young people in their research and practice about their experiences.

Building on the conceptual framework of the formation of young people's HE aspiration, I could consider other external factors that shape HE aspiration for these young people, or the other aspects presented as part of the framework. Future research could also explore the role of the school as an institution in shaping young people's HE aspiration. It could consider the school's presentation of non-STEM subjects, their selection and development of extra-curricular and WP activities, or their implementation of tailored and impartial careers support in considerations of young people's HE aspiration. In addition, I also found that the young people developed a positive affinity with me, which enabled the facilitation of discussions around HE aspiration. In changing the identity or the role of the researcher, I would be keen to research what impact this may have on the exploration of the young people's HE aspiration. As well as considering the role of the researcher, findings of the research suggest that underachievement was important in the young people's formations of their HE aspiration; academic subject hierarchies played a role in the development of their educational and career identities and that young people lacked impartial spaces and guidance for them to either individually and/or in groups, interrogate aspects of HE aspiration. All these in turn shaped the formation of HE aspiration for the young people. Future research could explore how these aspects of HE aspiration manifest across different settings, but also consider if they align with HE aspiration across the lifecycle.

My research also presents some important considerations for the policy and practice of Widening Participation. Firstly, from my time in the school, I found that limited education and careers advice, information and guidance was given to the young people. Where it was, it generally emphasised courses and careers in Engineering or Medicine, rather than wider Science, Technology and Mathematical or Arts, Humanities and Social Science careers and courses. Limited discussion was devoted to advising these younger pupils in the school about apprenticeships, how the HE application process worked and a critical space to explore their academic plans. Without a space to interrogate the aspects of their HE aspirations, the young people are required to navigate the complex decision-making process and educational hierarchies largely unaided by their school.

In addition, some young people, particularly those attending the off-site WP programmes, were reluctant to articulate specific career paths; articulating a career path appeared to be nerve-racking and high-stakes for these young people. Giving young people an opportunity in school to explore

additional concepts such as those outlined in the definition of HE aspiration, may help to diminish some apprehension around the need to solidify their future. By exploring aspects of HE aspiration in an allocated time, and sometimes in discussion with their classmates, it may present new vantage points and ideas that begin to broaden and challenge HE aspiration of the school, the pupils and the HE sector. On the other hand, some of the young people became increasingly reluctant to explore a variety of trajectories once they had chosen their GCSEs, and subsequently cemented their HE aspirations. In Amberley Grove, this sometimes began, although tentatively, as early as Year 8. Given that many national initiatives start at 14, many young people may have already begun to disregard, or even dismiss other options beyond those that they have asserted by the time they participate in these formal national programmes.

7.6 Closing remarks

This chapter presents a conclusion on how Higher Education aspiration is formed by Amberley Grove's "most-able, least-likely" young people. It summarises how the thesis formed these conclusions and presents reflections on my process to and through the PhD. It also outlines several contributions that the thesis makes to the field of Widening Participation research. It considers the limitations of the approach and moves to recommend how the research could be developed further to promote positive change in WP research, practice and policy. Overall, my research recommends a re-think of the theoretical positioning of individuals in Widening Participation. It encourages HE institutions to incorporate in their policy, research and interventions, young people's HE aspiration as a complex, evolving concept that is also formed in discussion and alongside competing priorities in classroom and schools.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Entry rates into higher education (2010-2019)

https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/higher-education/entry-rates-into-higher-education/latest

Student characteristic	Year	SUM(Count)	SUM(PCT_ROW)
Total	2018-19	1,658,545	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2018-19	380	0
Other ethnic group	2018-19	31,000	1.9
White - other	2018-19	6,340	0.4
White - Irish	2018-19	565	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2018-19	1,177,315	72
Mixed - other	2018-19	22,330	1.4
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2018-19	18,740	1.1
Mixed - white and black African	2018-19	9,600	0.6
Mixed - white and Asian	2018-19	21,710	1.3
Black or black British - other	2018-19	7,845	0.5
Black or black British - Caribbean	2018-19	29,880	1.8
Black or black British - African	2018-19	106,480	6.5
Asian or Asian British - other	2018-19	38,425	2.3
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2018-19	60,570	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2018-19	60,930	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2018-19	13,860	0.8
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2018-19	29,265	1.8
Total	2017-18	1,650,060	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2017-18	295	0
Other ethnic group	2017-18	29,465	1.8
White - other	2017-18	5,165	0.3
White - Irish	2017-18	435	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2017-18	1,181,245	72.7
Mixed - other	2017-18	21,020	1.3
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2017-18	18,575	1.1
Mixed - white and black African	2017-18	8,985	0.6
Mixed - white and Asian	2017-18	20,760	1.3
Black or black British - other	2017-18	7,805	0.5
Black or black British - Caribbean	2017-18	30,625	1.9
Black or black British - African	2017-18	103,950	6.4
Asian or Asian British - other	2017-18	37,315	2.3

Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2017-18	57,235	3.5
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2017-18	60,680	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2017-18	13,885	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2017-18	27,800	1.7
Total	2016-17	1,630,865	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2016-17	245	0
Other ethnic group	2016-17	27,505	1.7
White - other	2016-17	5,500	0.3
White - Irish	2016-17	280	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2016-17	1,180,755	73.5
Mixed - other	2016-17	20,060	1.2
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2016-17	18,040	1.1
Mixed - white and black African	2016-17	8,475	0.5
Mixed - white and Asian	2016-17	19,270	1.2
Black or black British - other	2016-17	7,715	0.5
Black or black British - Caribbean	2016-17	30,510	1.9
Black or black British - African	2016-17	100,915	6.3
Asian or Asian British - other	2016-17	35,500	2.2
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2016-17	54,015	3.4
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2016-17	59,520	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2016-17	13,650	0.8
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2016-17	25,330	1.6
Total	2015-16	1,589,725	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2015-16	220	0
Other ethnic group	2015-16	25,390	1.6
White - other	2015-16	4,150	0.3
White - Irish	2015-16	265	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2015-16	1,164,070	74.4
Mixed - other	2015-16	18,950	1.2
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2015-16	16,825	1.1
Mixed - white and black African	2015-16	7,775	0.5
Mixed - white and Asian	2015-16	18,010	1.2
Black or black British - other	2015-16	7,520	0.5
Black or black British - Caribbean	2015-16	29,230	1.9
Black or black British - African	2015-16	93,645	6
Asian or Asian British - other	2015-16	33,035	2.1
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2015-16	51,320	3.3
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2015-16	58,275	3.7

Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2015-16	13,560	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2015-16	22,215	1.4
Total	2014-15	1,563,095	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2014-15	170	0
Other ethnic group	2014-15	23,905	1.6
White - other	2014-15	10,500	0.7
White - Irish	2014-15	250	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2014-15	1,144,975	74.7
Mixed - other	2014-15	17,990	1.2
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2014-15	15,475	1
Mixed - white and black African	2014-15	7,255	0.5
Mixed - white and Asian	2014-15	16,830	1.1
Black or black British - other	2014-15	7,280	0.5
Black or black British - Caribbean	2014-15	28,455	1.9
Black or black British - African	2014-15	88,880	5.8
Asian or Asian British - other	2014-15	31,515	2.1
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2014-15	47,700	3.1
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2014-15	57,325	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2014-15	13,350	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2014-15	20,135	1.3
Total	2013-14	1,558,910	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2013-14	125	0
Other ethnic group	2013-14	21,245	1.4
White - other	2013-14	11,125	0.7
White - Irish	2013-14	255	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2013-14	1,163,765	76.3
Mixed - other	2013-14	17,430	1.1
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2013-14	14,505	1
Mixed - white and black African	2013-14	6,715	0.4
Mixed - white and Asian	2013-14	16,140	1.1
Black or black British - other	2013-14	5,765	0.4
Black or black British - Caribbean	2013-14	26,900	1.8
Black or black British - African	2013-14	79,315	5.2
Asian or Asian British - other	2013-14	28,985	1.9
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2013-14	44,425	2.9
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2013-14	58,170	3.8
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2013-14	13,630	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2013-14	16,185	1.1

Total	2012-13	1,590,065	Null
Gypsy or Traveller	2012-13	110	0
Other ethnic group	2012-13	20,255	1.3
White - other	2012-13	11,215	0.7
White - Irish	2012-13	240	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2012-13	1,199,840	77
Mixed - other	2012-13	17,380	1.1
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2012-13	13,980	0.9
Mixed - white and black African	2012-13	6,490	0.4
Mixed - white and Asian	2012-13	15,605	1
Black or black British - other	2012-13	5,760	0.4
Black or black British - Caribbean	2012-13	27,580	1.8
Black or black British - African	2012-13	78,980	5.1
Asian or Asian British - other	2012-13	28,300	1.8
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2012-13	43,590	2.8
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2012-13	59,095	3.8
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2012-13	14,185	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2012-13	15,465	1
Total	2011-12	1,691,945	Null
Other ethnic group	2011-12	19,650	1.2
White - other	2011-12	2,555	0.2
White - Irish	2011-12	255	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2011-12	1,303,525	78.6
Mixed - other	2011-12	17,915	1.1
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2011-12	14,020	0.8
Mixed - white and black African	2011-12	6,470	0.4
Mixed - white and Asian	2011-12	15,665	0.9
Black or black British - other	2011-12	6,085	0.4
Black or black British - Caribbean	2011-12	29,575	1.8
Black or black British - African	2011-12	79,510	4.8
Asian or Asian British - other	2011-12	28,600	1.7
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2011-12	43,120	2.6
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2011-12	61,960	3.7
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2011-12	15,190	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2011-12	15,350	0.9
Total	2010-11	1,675,085	Null
Other ethnic group	2010-11	18,960	1.2
White - other	2010-11	2,375	0.1

White - Irish	2010-11	340	0
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British	2010-11	1,290,400	78.9
Mixed - other	2010-11	16,985	1
Mixed - white and black Caribbean	2010-11	12,955	0.8
Mixed - white and black African	2010-11	6,125	0.4
Mixed - white and Asian	2010-11	14,490	0.9
Black or black British - other	2010-11	6,300	0.4
Black or black British - Caribbean	2010-11	29,990	1.8
Black or black British - African	2010-11	76,520	4.7
Asian or Asian British - other	2010-11	27,170	1.7
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2010-11	41,610	2.5
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2010-11	62,380	3.8
Asian or Asian British - Chinese	2010-11	15,195	0.9
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2010-11	14,665	0.9

Pupils Observed:

| Pupil Name | Date | | | | Type of Data Collection |
	Observed	Lesson	Room	Teacher Initials	

Subject:

Time Observed:

Date of Observation:

Lesson Number observed:

Consider in relation to the context:
    What is the layout of the space?
    Where are staff and pupils located? Where are you located? Do people move?
    How do people interact with one another? What are the levels of interactions within the space? Who is speaking and when?
    What imagery and literature is in the space?
    Are there explicit rules or clear expectations posted on the walls or outlined in the start of the lesson? When are these shared?
    Was the lesson being held by the scheduled staff member?
    Was the lesson timetabled or are pupils working off-timetable?
    What are people generally doing and how do they seem to be feeling? Does this change throughout the session?

Note whether the interactions were from everyday conversation, were they elicited and/or prompted by you, shared in groups or individually

Write down interactions you see or hear that relate to the following topics:

Higher education and University
Educational past, present, Post-16 and any future plans, and intent to achieve those
Additional educational activities, commitments and interests

Subject and educational activity enjoyments
Young people's expressions on prior, current or future attainment, school, careers, jobs
Their educational self-confidence, -efficacy or -concept and indicators of those through suggested or outlined roles and statuses in the session
Cultural references and people mentioned in relation to their education

11 October 2016

Dear Parents and Carers,

My name is Krystal Douglas and I am a doctoral researcher based in the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Warwick. My PhD supervisors are Professor Christina Hughes (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/hughes/) and Professor Ian Abbott (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/staff/ian_abbott). I have a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Birkbeck, University of London and, as a parent myself, am particularly interested in developing research that aims to promote positive learning outcomes for all young people. In collaboration with RSA Academies, I am conducting a research study into how adolescents' friendship networks impact their higher education choices and would like to invite your child to participate.

Current research indicates that early adolescence (ages 10-14) is a particularly important time in academic development. During this academic year, I will be working with students and staff in Years 7-9 at Holyhead School to help understand the role that friendships play in students' academic development.

How will your child be involved?

If you would like your child to participate in this study, the following will take place:

• Your child will take part in a series of interactive activities, pre-approved in advance, by a member of the senior leadership team at Holyhead School.
• Your child will participate in small group discussions exploring questions on the future, their aspirations and their views on higher education. The discussions will be audiotaped.
• I, the researcher, will undertake observation of some timetabled lessons.

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E: k.douglas@warwick.ac.uk

- All activities will take place on the school site during the school day and will take place over the course of this academic year.
- In addition to parent or carer signed consent, each student will be given a consent form to sign at the beginning of each activity to confirm they are happy to participate. No student will be permitted to participate without the signed consent of a parent or carer.

This project will require the participants to actively engage in the research over the entire year, however, they are able to withdraw from the study at any time.

Are there are risks?

The researcher does not foresee any adverse effects for your child at participating in this research and reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and the potentially unknown risks.

Your child may choose to answer only those questions they would like to. They may also stop the entire process at any time, as stated previously, without penalty.

How will confidentiality be ensured?

To maintain confidentiality, all student participants will be assigned a reference number and their data will be collected and stored in relation to their given reference number.

Any data will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act, which requires that data be stored securely. In addition to this, all personal identifiers will be removed and only the researcher will have access to the raw data.

How will your child benefit?

It is hoped that the participants of this study will have access to an additional resource that will further illuminate their post-compulsory education plans.

Any questions?

If at any time, you would like to find out more information about the study or your child's participation, I am happy to answer any questions you may have. You may email me at k.douglas@warwick.ac.uk. Additionally, you may contact either the Holyhead School lead for this project, Ms Cottam, Senior Vice Principal, or email my University supervisors, Professor Hughes (c.l.hughes@warwick.ac.uk) and Professor Abbott (i.d.abbott@warwick.ac.uk). Questions about your child's rights as a research participant, or comments or complaints about the study may also be addressed to the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warwick.

Yours faithfully,

Krystal Douglas
Doctoral Researcher
Centre for Education Studies
University of Warwick

If you would like your child to take up this opportunity, please complete this consent form and return it by Monday 17th October 2016, where I will also be available between 3.20pm and 3.45pm to answer any questions you may have.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw your child's participation at any point without penalty.

Child's Name _____

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

Krystal Douglas - Friendships, Networks
and Aspiration to Higher Education
Centre for Education Studies
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 8UW UK
E: k.douglas@warwick.ac.uk

Appendix 4 - Ethics Forms

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

CENTRE FOR
EDUCATION STUDIES

MPhil, PhD, EdD Research Students and Masters by Research: Ethical Approval

All research undertaken by the students and staff within CES must conform to the University's ethical guidelines. There are separate procedures for staff and students. This guidance addresses the latter.

All students receive training in research ethics and are required to complete the appropriate form before undertaking research, including small projects, dissertations and theses as appropriate. The completion of the form is an opportunity to discuss ethical issues with your supervisor/tutor and is intended as a learning exercise as much as an administrative process to ensure compliance with CES policy.

The amount and type of training in research ethics is proportionate to both the qualification and the research project; the content of the forms varies accordingly. In general, undergraduates will be expected to undertake research projects which give relatively common and straightforward ethical issues while doctoral studies may raise complex, challenging ethical issues. As most studies involve children and young people, research ethics pertaining to vulnerable participants is a common issue.

You should complete the ethical approval form for the research project appropriate to your programme. These may be obtained from the CES website or from the designated administrator:

BA Early Childhood Studies — Paula Clarke-Bennett
MA (Taught) — Donna Jay
MA (Research) MPhil/PhD, EdD — Andy Brierley

For *EdD* students, separate forms are required for each specialist study (8000 words) and the thesis.

You should complete the form, which should then be signed by yourself and countersigned by your tutor/supervisor. Completion of the form will be guided by your tutor/supervisor and is intended to help you consider the ethical issues concerned, so you must provide full details. The form should then be returned to Andy Brierley in the Research Office (WE1.33) for processing. **Please note:** as the form requires signatures you should **not** email it – the paper original is required.

The form will then be reviewed by the relevant member of staff. The proposal may be approved, approved subject to minor amendments, or declined. The form will then be returned to the Research Office for recording and then returned to your course secretary who will report the outcome to yourself and your tutor/supervisor. If any changes are required you should undertake these **in consultation** with your tutor/supervisor. The form should then be resubmitted to the Research Office, when it will be reviewed.

Further Guidance

Further guidance and support is available from the University's website:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/rss/services/ethics/statement/guidance/

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/rss/services/ethics/governance/codeofconduct/

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/rss/services/ethics/statement/guidance/#

and from the ethical codes of appropriate organisations including the British Educational Research Association, British Psychological Society and the British Sociological Association:

www.warwick.ac.uk/services/rss

www.bera.org.uk

www.bps.org.uk

www.britsoc.org.uk

NB: doctoral Students

Doctoral students are initially registered for an MPhil/PhD and transfer to the PhD subject on the completion of a successful Upgrade. Ethical approval should first be sought early in the MPhil and certainly before any fieldwork. The Upgrade provides a second opportunity to review the ethical issues of your research. A completed ethical approval form should therefore accompany your Upgrade paper.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

CENTRE FOR
EDUCATION STUDIES

Application for Ethical Approval for Research Degrees (MA by research, MPHIL/PhD, EdD)

Student number: 1565637

Student name: Krystal Douglas

PhD [X]   EdD [ ]   MA by research [ ]

Project title: Friendships, Networks and Aspiration to Higher Education

Supervisor: Dr Ian Abbott, Professor Christina Hughes
Alison Critchley (CEO of RSA Academies)

Funding body (if relevant):
Economic and Social Research Council
Formal Collaboration with RSA Academies

> Please ensure you have read the Guidance for the Ethical Conduct of Research available in the handbook.

Methodology

Please outline the methodology, e.g. observation, individual interviews, focus groups, group testing etc.

Observation over two dates in December 2017 and January 2018 at the Warwick Sutton Scholars Programme of three participants already participating in my wider doctoral research.

Participants

Please specify all participants in the research including ages of children and young people where appropriate. Also specify if any participants are vulnerable e.g. children; as a result of learning disability.

Three participants aged 13-14 who attend the Holyhead School, Birmingham and their parents.

Respect for participants' rights and dignity

How will the fundamental rights and dignity of participants be respected, e.g. confidentiality, respect of cultural and religious values?

I will ensure that all the information shared with me, as the researcher, will remain confidential. I will respect the privacy of the participants and ensure that both parents or carers and students are fully aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Parents and carers will be made aware of the observation dates in advance and students will have the right not to participate in the observations given if they do not wish to, although this may not disregard them from participating in the study overall, if they so wish.

Privacy and confidentiality

How will confidentiality be assured? Please address all aspects of research including protection of data records, thesis, reports/papers that might arise from the study.

I will ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act and University of Warwick guidelines.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the students, all student participants will be assigned a reference number and their data will be collected and stored in relation to their given reference number. All personal identifiers will be removed from the dataset and students will be referred to by alternative names, where relevant.

Maintaining the complete anonymity of the School may prove challenging, but in an effort to assure confidentiality, I will not reference the actual name of the School or RSA Academies (the Academy's Trust) in any publications, nor its specific location; "West Midlands" will be used as a general location.

Consent

How will prior informed consent be obtained from the following?

From participants:

The researcher will explain the purpose of these observations to the student participants and the three students will be asked if they would like to participate in these observations. The student participants will also be given a consent form to sign at the beginning of the observations to confirm that they wish to participate.

From others:

Prospective student participants will take home a separate consent form for their parents or carers to sign confirming that they are happy for the student to participate. No student will be permitted to participate without the signed consent of a parent or carer. The consent form will contain the University of Warwick header. The parent or carer will retain a copy of the signed consent form.

Further contact details have been provided if parents or carers would like to raise queries about the research. See consent forms attached.

If prior informed consent is not to be obtained, give reason:

N/A

Will participants be explicitly informed of the student's status?

Yes – the participants will be aware that I am a PhD student from the University of Warwick

Competence

How will you ensure that all methods used are undertaken with the necessary competence?

The researcher has successfully completed training in Advanced Research Methods facilitated by the Centre for Education Studies and advanced training courses in the Philosophy of Social Science and the Practice of Social Research, as well as advanced courses in Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods facilitated by the Warwick ESRC DTC. The researcher will received a Postgraduate Certificate in Social Science Research with Distinction.

Protection of participants

How will participants' safety and well-being be safeguarded?

The research will not involve any activities that may pose any health and safety issues.

Participant wellbeing will be monitored verbally throughout the observation.

Child protection

Will a CRB check be needed? Yes ☐ No ☒ (If yes, please attach a copy.)

Addressing dilemmas

Even well planned research can produce ethical dilemmas. How will you address any ethical dilemmas that may arise in your research?

I previously identified three areas of potential ethical dilemmas within my research: research with children, the anonymity of the school, securing informed consent from parents and students.

Issues involving safeguarding, urgent or otherwise, will be reported to the Warwick Sutton Scholars Organiser, M. Kehr and if necessary the School's Designated Safeguarding Lead, S. Roberts. In the case of all other ethical dilemmas, I will discuss them with and seek advice from my supervisors.

Misuse of research

How will you seek to ensure that the research and the evidence resulting from it are not misused?

It may be that policy agents, the media or educational establishments will take findings out of context or potentially use them to make claims not fully supported by the data. In the event of this, I will approach the organisation to offer an alternative view for clarification. I will ensure that I disseminate my findings appropriately to limit them being misconstrued. Only I, the researcher, will retain access to the raw data. I will ensure I do not claim a degree of certainty not warranted by the data.

Loveless, T., Ladd, H., & Rouse, C. (1998). The Use and Misuse of Research in Educational Reform. Brookings Papers on Education Policy, (1), 279-317

Support for research participants

What action is proposed if sensitive issues are raised or a participant becomes upset?

If a participant becomes upset, I will emphasise their right to withdraw at any point and suspend the observation, if necessary. I will notify the Warwick Sutton Scholars lead of their discomfort and liaise with the student appropriately to understand better why they became upset.

Integrity

How will you ensure that your research and its reporting are honest, fair and respectful to others?

Commonly discussed in literature related to the "misuse of research data", is the issue that research into educational practice is conducted in institutions, which are far removed from the "schools and classrooms where practice takes place" (Loveless et al, 1998). I will be working in collaboration with the educational institution and with the student participants, in order to maximise the participant voice and ensure that the research and evidence resulting from it, is most representative of the participants involved.

By conducting observations outside of their usual educational establishment, I hope to explore a new vantage point of the participants' social networks.

Furthermore, as part of my wider research, I will facilitate discussions about the early results with the participants to find out if they reflect the participants' views.

What agreement has been made for the attribution of authorship by yourself and your supervisor(s) of any reports or publications?

The agreement is that my supervisors will not be seeking any publication arising from my thesis.

Other issues

Please specify other issues not discussed above, if any, and how you will address them.

I will abide by the BERA and BSA ethical guidelines.

Signed:		
Student:	▓▓▓▓	Date: 06/12/17
Supervisor:	I.D.ABBOTT	Date:

Please submit this form to the Research Office (Andy Brierley, room WE133)

Action taken:

☑ Approved
☐ Approved with modification or conditions – see below
☐ Action deferred. Please supply additional information or clarification – see below

Name: ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓
Signature ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓
Date: ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

Stamped:

Notes of Action:
Centre for Education Studies
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL

Ethical approval RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT

Application for Ethical Approval
for Research Degrees
(PhD, EdD, MA by research)

Student number: *1565637*
Student name: *Krystal Douglas*

PhD [X]   EdD [ ]   MA by research [ ]

Project title:

Friendships, Networks and Aspiration to Higher Education

Supervisor:

Professor Christina Hughes, Dr Ian Abbott
Alison Critchley (CEO of RSA Academies)

Funding body (if relevant):

Economic and Social Research Council
Collaboration with RSA Academies

Please ensure you have read the Guidance for the Ethical Conduct of Research available in the handbook.

to, although this may not disregard them from participating in the study overall, if they so wish.

Privacy and confidentiality

How will confidentiality be assured? Please address all aspects of research including protection of data records, thesis, reports/papers that might arise from the study.

I will ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act and University of Warwick guidelines.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the students, all student participants will be assigned a reference number and their data will be collected and stored in relation to their given reference number. All personal identifiers will be removed from the dataset and students will be referred to by alternative names, where relevant.

Maintaining the complete anonymity of the School may prove challenging, but in an effort to assure confidentiality, I will not reference the actual name of the School or RSA Academies (the Academy's Trust) in any publications, nor its specific location; "West Midlands" will be used as a general location.

Consent

How will prior informed consent be obtained from the following?

From participants:

A meeting will be arranged by the School's project lead with the student participants during the school day, in order for the researcher to explain the project and provide a forum for the students to express an interest and ask any questions they may have before they confirm they would like to participate. The student participants will be given a consent form to sign at the beginning of each activity to confirm that they wish to participate.

Methodology

Please outline the methodology, e.g. observation, individual interviews, focus groups, group testing etc.

I will be conducting an ethnographic case study within a secondary school. The methods I will use within my research to gather data will be:

Focus groups
Participatory techniques
Document analysis
Observation during the school day

Participants

Please specify all participants in the research including ages of children and young people where appropriate. Also specify if any participants are vulnerable e.g. children; as a result of learning disability.

A maximum of 25 students aged 11-14 who attend the Holyhead School, Birmingham.

Respect for participants' rights and dignity

How will the fundamental rights and dignity of participants be respected, e.g. confidentiality, respect of cultural and religious values?

I will ensure that all the information shared with me, as the researcher, will remain confidential. I will respect the privacy of the participants and ensure that both parents or carers and students are fully aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Parents and carers will be given details of specific activities in advance and students will have the right not to participate in a given activity if they do not wish

From others:

Prospective student participants will take home a separate consent form for their parents or carers to sign confirming that they are happy for the student to participate. No student will be permitted to participate without the signed consent of a parent or carer. The consent form will contain the University of Warwick header. The parent or carer will retain a copy of the signed consent form. The researcher will arrange a set time, prior to the consent form deadline, in which parents and carers may visit the school to ask any questions that they may have about the project. Further contact details have been provided if parents or carers would like to raise queries about the research outside of this time.

See consent forms attached.

If prior informed consent is not to be obtained, give reason:

N/A

Will participants be explicitly informed of the student's status?

Yes – the participants will be aware that I am a PhD student from the University of Warwick

Competence

How will you ensure that all methods used are undertaken with the necessary competence?

The researcher has successfully completed training in Advanced Research Methods facilitated by the Centre for Education Studies and advanced training courses in the Philosophy of Social Science and the Practice of Social Research

facilitated by the Warwick ESRC DTC. The researcher will also complete advanced courses in Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods in 2016/17 presented by the Warwick ESRC DTC.

Protection of participants

How will participants' safety and well-being be safeguarded?

The research will not involve any activities that may pose any health and safety issues.

The participants will establish a list of appropriate behaviour to display throughout the activity sessions during the project.

Participant wellbeing will be monitored throughout the process, both verbally and via questionnaires

Disposable cameras will be provided to participants during the relevant participatory techniques to prohibit social media interaction.

Child protection

Will a CRB check be needed? Yes ☒   No ☐ (If yes, please attach a copy.)

Addressing dilemmas

Even well planned research can produce ethical dilemmas. How will you address any ethical dilemmas that may arise in your research?

I have identified three areas of potential ethical dilemmas: research with children, the anonymity of the school, securing informed consent from parents and students.

Issues involving safeguarding, urgent or otherwise, will be reported to the School's Designated Safeguarding Leads, A. Cottam or A McLean. In the case of

contact of their discomfort and liaise with them appropriately to understand better why they became upset.

Integrity

How will you ensure that your research and its reporting are honest, fair and respectful to others?

Commonly discussed in literature related to the "misuse of research data", is the issue that research into educational practice is conducted in institutions, which are far removed from the "schools and classrooms where practice takes place" (Loveless et al, 1998). I will be working in collaboration with the educational institution and in a participatory manner with the student participants, in order to maximise the participant voice and ensure that the research and evidence resulting from it, is most representative of the participants involved.

I will also facilitate discussions about the early results with the participants to find out if they reflect the participants' views.
The participatory framework will help to limit the imposed social power relations between myself and the participants.

What agreement has been made for the attribution of authorship by yourself and your supervisor(s) of any reports or publications?

The agreement is that my supervisors will not be seeking any publication arising from my thesis.

all other ethical dilemmas, I will discuss them with and seek advice from my supervisors. If at any point the School is asking me to become increasingly involved in the role of Teaching Assistant, to the detriment of my role as a researcher, I will raise this issue with my supervisor and school contact.

Misuse of research

How will you seek to ensure that the research and the evidence resulting from it are not misused?

It may be that policy agents, the media or educational establishments will take findings out of context or potentially use them to make claims not fully supported by the data. In the event of this, I will approach the organisation to offer an alternative view for clarification. I will ensure that I disseminate my findings appropriately to limit them being misconstrued. Only I, the researcher, will retain access to the raw data. I will ensure I do not claim a degree of certainty not warranted by the data.

Loveless, T., Ladd, H., & Rouse, C. (1998). The Use and Misuse of Research in Educational Reform. Brookings Papers on Education Policy, (1), 279-317

Support for research participants

What action is proposed if sensitive issues are raised or a participant becomes upset?

If sensitive issues are raised, that are age-appropriate I will allow the discussion to continue. All discussions will be audio-recorded. If the discussion is not age-appropriate, I will encourage that the discussion desist and I will redirect the conversation.

If a participant becomes upset, I will emphasise their right to withdraw at any point and potentially suspend the activity, if necessary. I will notify the school
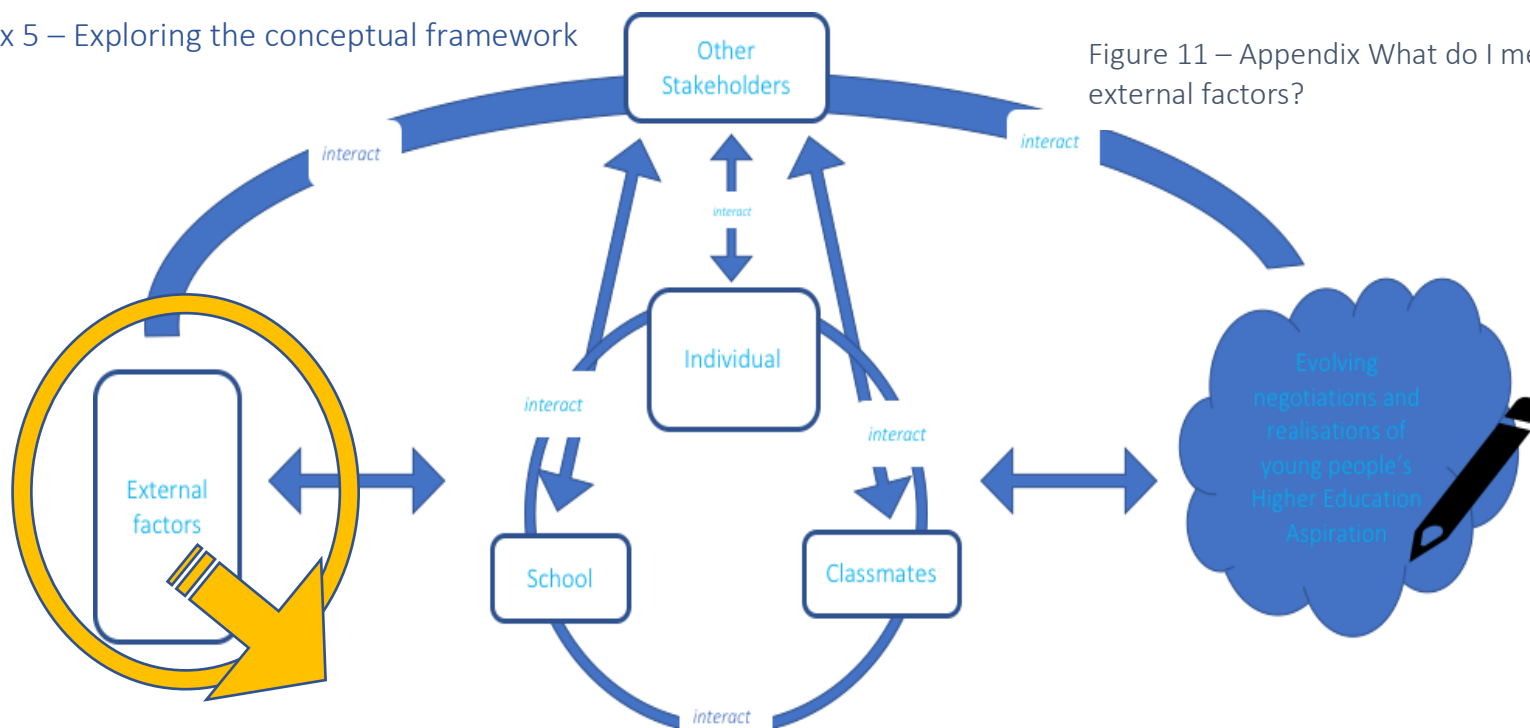
Figure 11 – Appendix What do I mean by external factors?

External Factors include societal institutions such as the economy, technological advancements and the media, who play a role in shaping young people's HE aspiration (Prodonovich et al, 2014; Cabinet Office, 2008).

These external factors may also include discrimination, poverty and racism. Examples of this may be direct experiences of harassment or discrimination or indirect discrimination for examples in young people's engagement with careers personnel, school staff, WP staff and outreach provision. HE aspirations are often stunted by young people's access to information, activities and personnel who are able to guide young people on the common trajectories to realising their aspirations (Basit, 1996; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Prodonovich et al, 2014). As a result of racial stereotypes and ill-informed cultural assumptions, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds in particular are often poorly advised or receive negligible support for pursuing their aspirations.

Cultural ideas within groups and organisations, also present external factors that may shape aspiration, as suggested by Appadurai (2004). These cultural ideas are rearticulated by young people and subsumed into their own HE aspirations, or expressed as being "for the likes of us" in work by Bourdieu, Archer et al (2014) and others.

Figure 12 – Appendix Who are the Other Stakeholders?

HE aspirations are shaped not just by young people in silos, but also in interaction with a wide list of stakeholders; each have varying and evolving knowledge, investments and priorities in the HE aspirations of young people. Priorities, power relations and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders, including parents, peers, families and role models, workplaces, wider communities, HE institutions, outreach and WP practitioners, academics – both teaching and/or research, shape HE aspirations. Governmental and HE institutional priorities around expansion, ensuring financial viability and institutional income, increasing student recruitment, whilst navigating HE policy relics from previous UK governments and asserting new political ideologies around HE and social mobility, are all intertwined, and often misappropriated as endeavours for social justice.
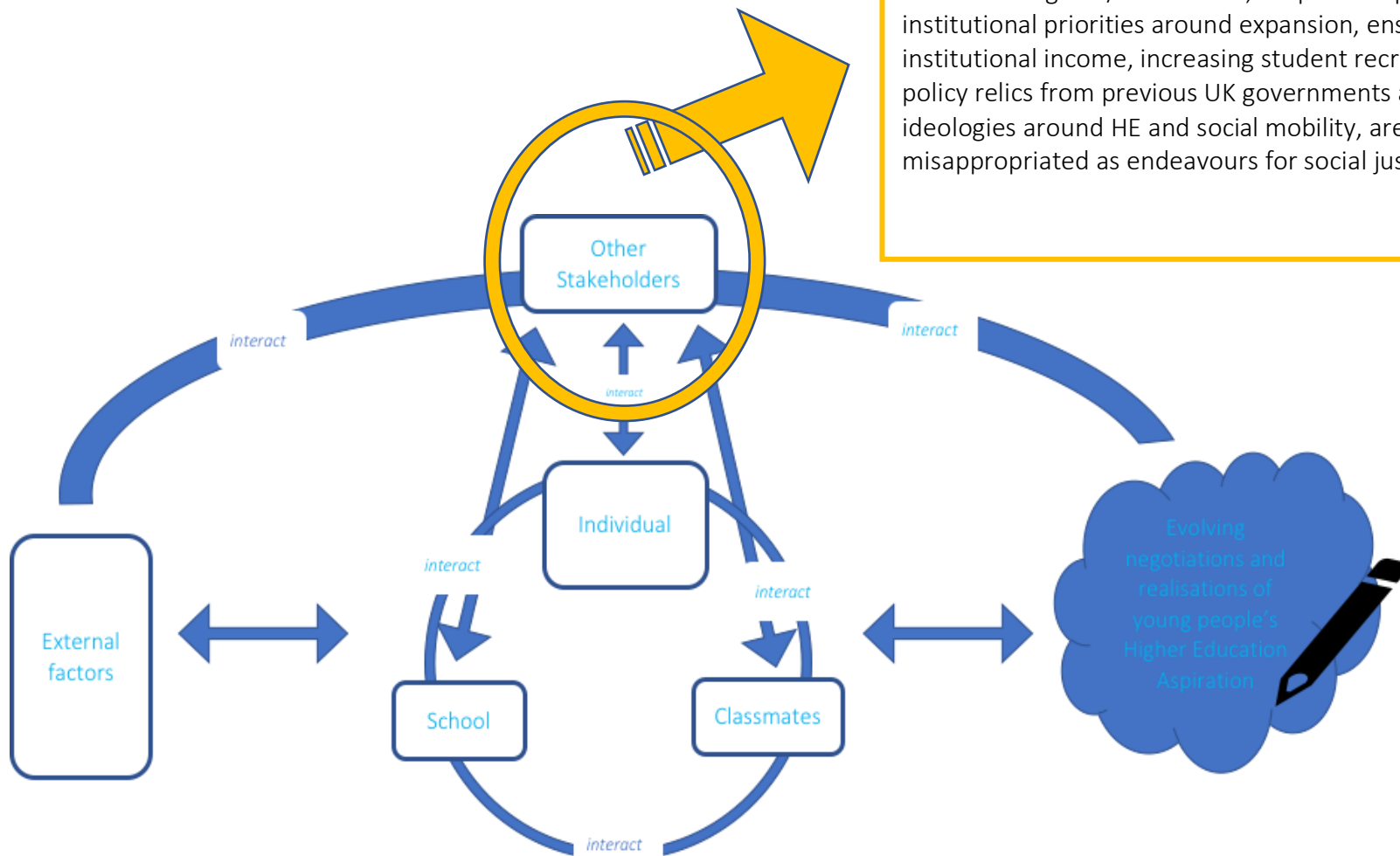

Other Stakeholders

interact

interact

interact

Individual

interact

interact

External factors

School

Classmates

interact

Evolving negotiations and realisations of young people's Higher Education Aspiration

In this framing, the individual refers to the singular young person.

Their HE aspirations as goal-driven plans for the future as suggested by Hart (2012), young people's knowledge of HE, interacting with their knowledge of past, present and future educational and career identities, including prior and current attainment (Gutman & Schoon, 2012; Crawford, 2014), levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider positive (or negative) self-concept. All these are shaped by cultural identities, as well as the priorities and hierarchies of a variety of stakeholders working towards the negotiation and realisation of young people's plans for the future beyond compulsory education. It is an evolving process of (re-)articulation, shaped by a zero-sum game in which young people are guided to perform a play without a script, argued in literature by Bok (2010) and Bourdieu (1990).

Individuals may draw on cultural identities, class identities, habitus and capitals, social networks and cultural ideas to underpin their HE aspirations (Yosso (2005), Basit (2012), (Bok 2010; Stahl, 2015) Archer et al (2015) and Law et al (2014). These include capitals prized both within school and outside of school culture. HE aspirations are often marred by uncertainty, risk and doubt for individuals (Reay, 1998), with Boliver (2017), Butler (2012)

Higher occupational aspirations generally exist for those of minority ethnic backgrounds (Strand & Winston, 2008; Platt & Parsons, 2018, Wong, 2015)
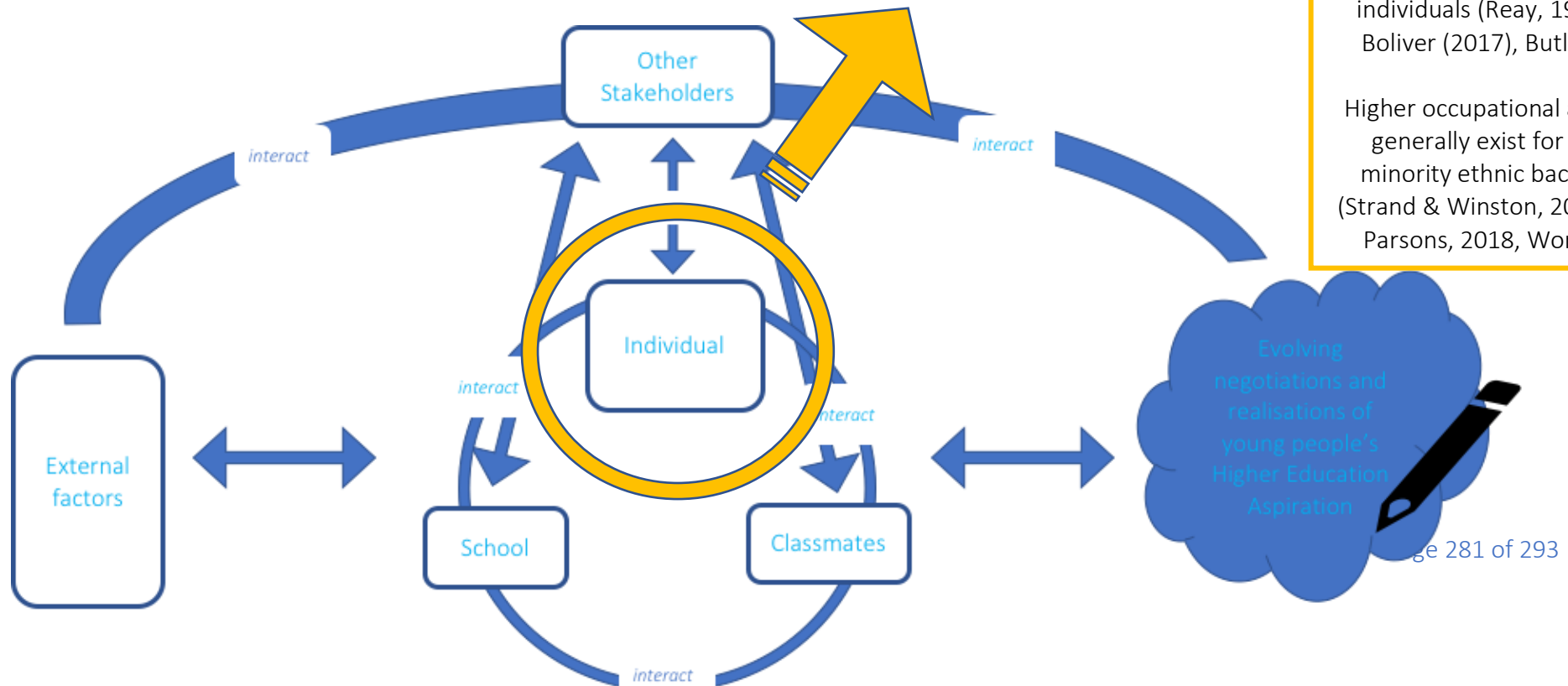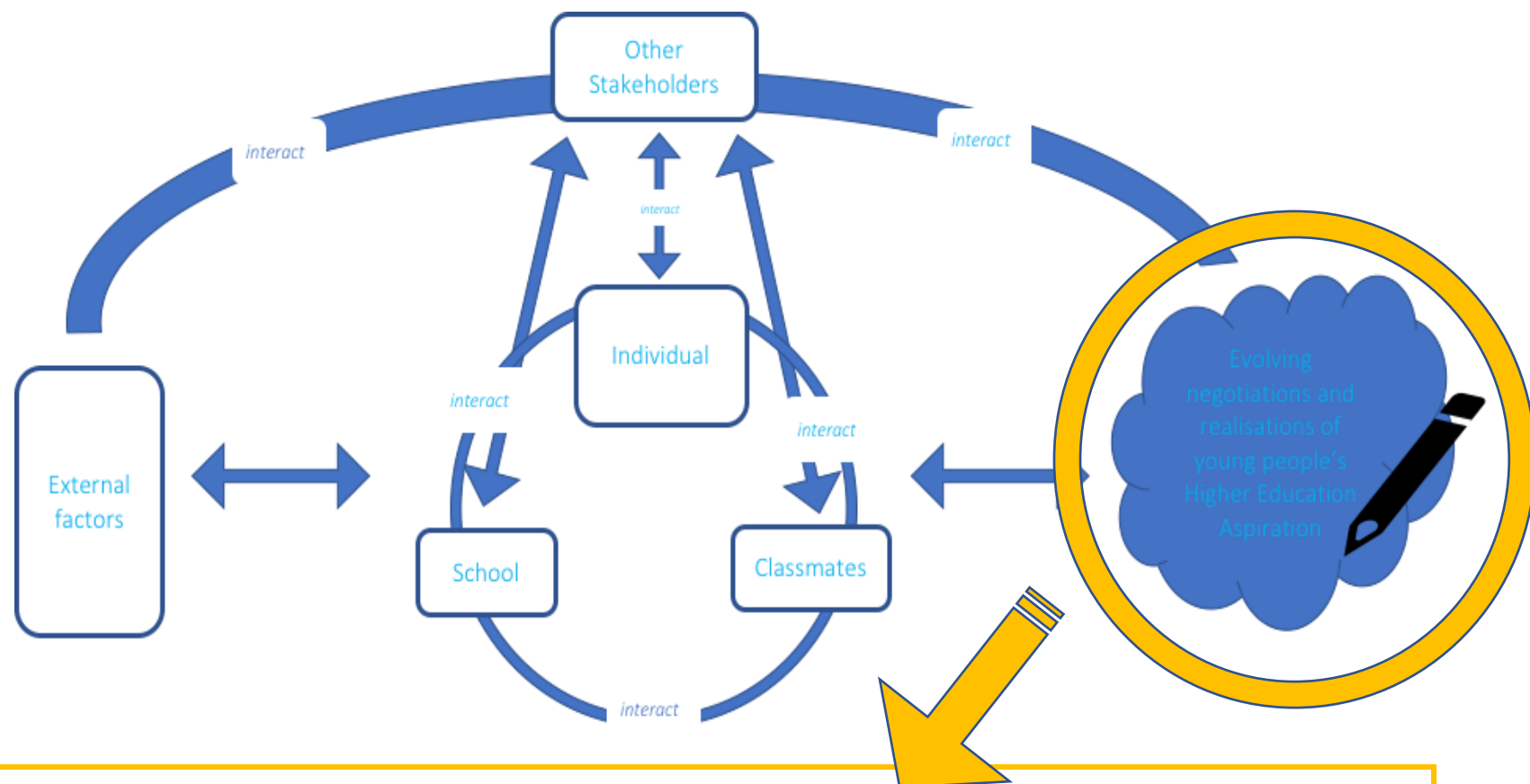

Other Stakeholders

Individual

External factors

School

Classmates

interact

Evolving negotiations and realisations of young people's Higher Education Aspiration

Figure 14 – Appendix How did
I study HE aspiration?

Other
Stakeholders

interact

interact

interact

Individual

External
factors

interact

interact

School

Classmates

interact

Evolving
negotiations and
realisations of
young people's
Higher Education
Aspiration

HE Aspiration is a specific topic of study. Bok (2010) as well as others such as St Clair & Benjamin (2011) suggest that researchers rethink their approach to researching aspiration by problematising the concept, using a variety of methods to explore HE aspirations and rebut notions of universally and inherently low aspirations to HE and higher level study within groups of young people themselves. With my research seeking to adopt data collection methods which are self-affirming, engaging and more inclusive than traditional methods in WP research, I plan to facilitate an environment in which participants feel confident and comfortable to articulate their HE Aspirations.

HE aspirations should be considered at all ages, although 11-14 is thought to be a particularly significant age range (Gottfredson, 2002)
HE aspirations are often shaped by gender as it has been found that boys and girls often differ in their HE aspirations. As evidenced in Basit (1996) and Archer (2002), many girls hold aspirations which reflect agency and individualism, but are often articulated differently by boys or school staff, who assume that girls' aspirations display little agency.

Figure 15 – Appendix Who are the classmates?
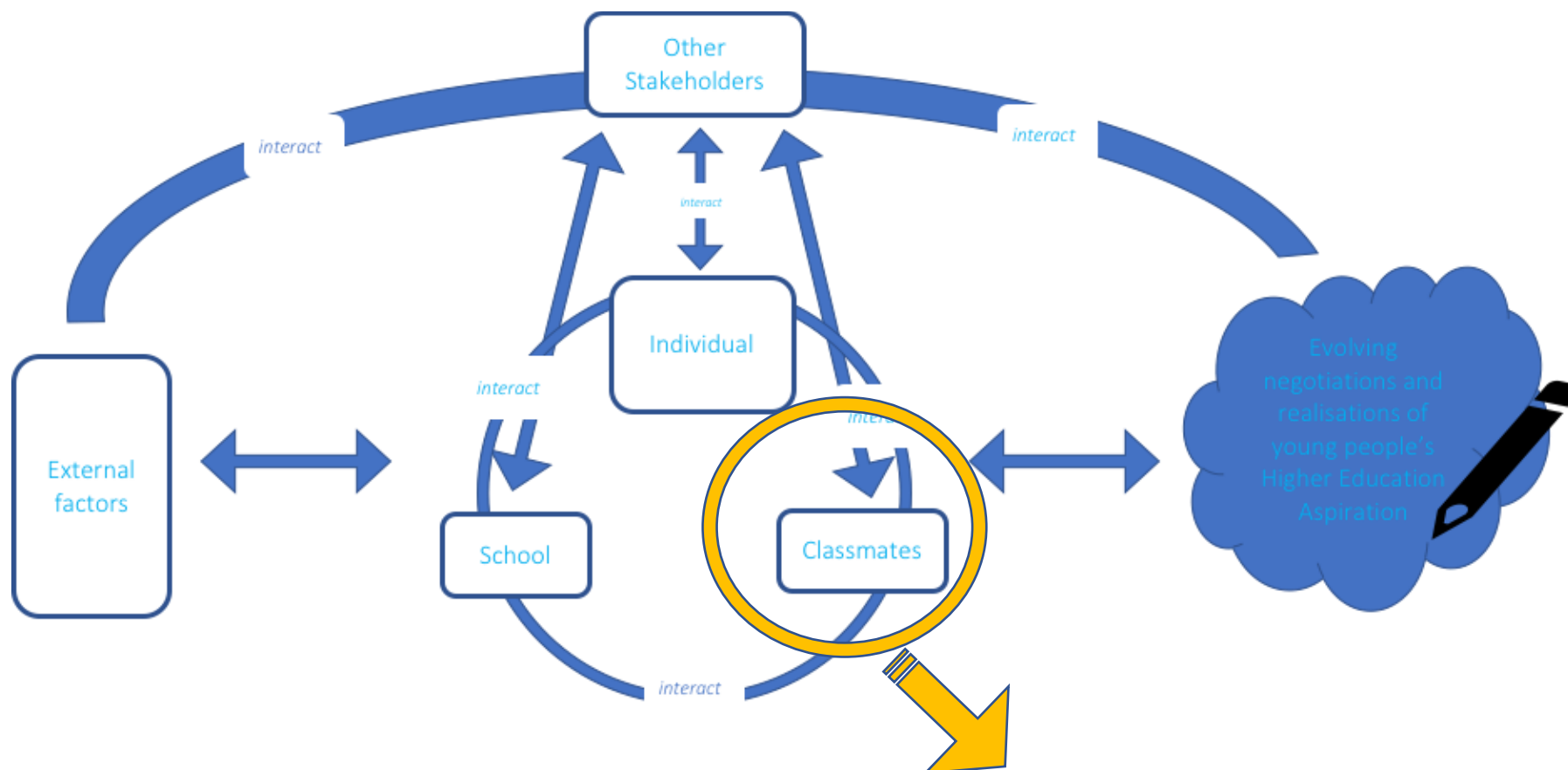
Limited research in the WP field has considered the role of classmates in shaping HE aspiration. The role of peers in HE choice is considered by Brooks, 2003b. They suggest that whilst families offer knowledge about HE, young people also make choices for HE, based on where they feel they sit in their peer hierarchies.

In this research, the classmates include the other high-attaining pupils in Year 8 and 9 within the School. With the emphasis in public policy on the experiences of high attaining pupils, this research was interested to explore how HE aspiration was formed and interacted with, by those with similarly high academic attainment.

Figure 16 – Appendix What is the School?
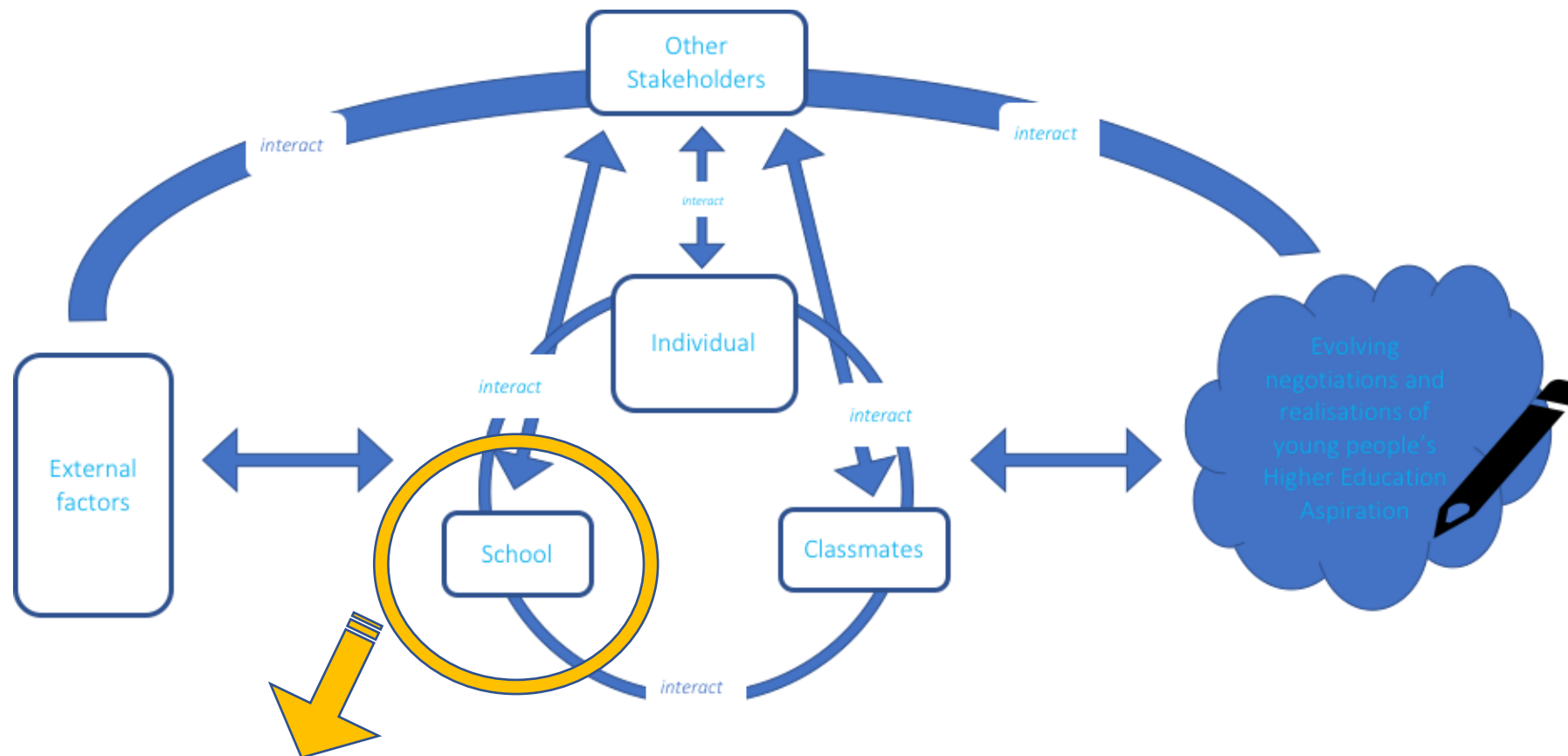
The School here, refers to the Institution of Amberley Grove, its school staff, its senior leadership, its values, media and building. This aimed to gather a wider picture of how HE aspiration is formed in the school. School and college priorities around the need to reduce attainment gaps, ascribe to the aspiration-raising policy and demonstrate evidence that they are producing "School and College-level Strategies to Raise Aspirations of High-achieving Disadvantaged Pupils to Pursue Higher Education" (DfE, 2014) present a backdrop on which to consider HE aspiration

Let's talk about *Your Future*

What is the difference between would, should, and could?	Are there people in your life who tell you what you **should** do in the future? If so, who are these people?
Have you told anyone what you would like to do in your future? If so, who did you tell?	Are there people in your life who tell you what you **could** do in the future? If so, who are these people?
At what age do you think you will become an adult?	In the future, I know I will be a great _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Where would you go or whom would you speak to if you wanted some information about what to do in the future? What would you ask?	Do you do anything now that you would like to continue to do in the future?

At what age would you like to leave school? What would you like to do when you leave school? Has anyone spoken to you about what you *should* do when you leave school? Has anyone spoken to you about what you *could* do when you leave school?

Student Profile

727 & 291 - list
First Name: Cassius
Surname: Wilde
Age: 18
University Choices:
1.   Oxford – Away (favourite)
2.   Warwick - Home
3.   Cambridge - Away
4.   London School of Economics - Away
5.   Cardiff University - Home
Subject: Medicine
Parents went to university: Mother – No, Father - No
Siblings: Younger
Driving: Yes
Hobbies: Sports, Cook
Race: Mixed (White and Asian)

205 & 134 - mindmap
First Name: Sarah
Surname: Hart
Age: 19
University Choices:
1.   Yale
2.   Oxford (favourite)
3.   Warwick
4.   Cambridge -
5.   Harvard –
Subject: Medicine
Parents didn't go to university
A* student
She can just about afford to go to university
She wants to be a surgeon
She wants to work in a super hospital

3 younger siblings – she wants to set an example

107 & 181 - mindmap
First Name: Jeffrey
Surname: Harbart
Age: 18
University Choices:
1.   Oxford –
2.   Warwick - (favourite)
3.   Cambridge
4.   Harvard
5.   York University - Home
Subject: Computing
Got into Oxford – Wants to be a computing designer – game designer
Parents didn't go to university– Jeffrey can speak it aswell
Parents are immigrants – German - Child on the way
Want their only child to go to university – to make them proud
Designed a game for someone before and hopes to take onto bigger things
He's moving from Walsall to London to live a better life and go to uni. Get a better job.
Hobbies: Taking gadgets apart and looking at whats in them and how they work

221 & 354 – list
First Name: Damien
Surname:
Age: 20
University Choices:
1.   Oxford (favourite)
2.   Warwick

3.   Cambridge -
4.   UCL (University College London)
5.   Imperial College London –
Subject to study: Physics
Languages spoken: Mandarin/English/Punjabi/Vietnam/Spanish
Older siblings
Extra-curricular: Scuba-diving, hiking, football, swimming, snorkelling, paintballing, shooting, quad-biking, biking, horseriding
After uni: Become an astrophysicist

802 & 469 - list
First Name: Emilia
Surname: Scott
Age: 20
University Choices:
1.   Oxford
2.   Cambridge (favourite)
3.   Caltec
4.   National University of Singapore
5.   University of Toronto
All living Away
A Levels – A* Chemistry, Biology, Physics
B – Maths
A – English
Parents: Father went to university and studied a degree in engineering. Her mother came from Singapore.
Siblings: 3 brothers – only girl
Her plan after university is to teach in primary schools

all around the world, discovering new ways of teaching.
Language they speak: Mandarin, (Chinese)
Extracurricular activities: Swimming and netball

280 & 313 - list
First Names: Makenzey-Swan Micaila & Devonte-King Xander-Jamal
Surname: Powell
Age: 18
They are twins – 1 female and 1 male
University Choices:
1.   Hanoi university of science and technology
2.   The University of West Indies, Mona
3.   University of Deli
4.   Yale
5.   Marie curie university
Her parents did go to university and they studied science
Siblings each other and Isabella-Celest Charlotte and Elija-Prince Aidan.
They want to study biomedical science and neuroscience
They speak vietnameas, hindi, French and Spanish

Hobbies: basketball, rugby, cricket and football, cooking
Plans after uni: get dream job and get married when earning money and have children.

137 & 126 - list
First Name: Reiss
Surname: Price
Age: 18
University Choices:
1.   Oxford
2.   Cambridge (favourite)
3.   Wolverhampton
4.   Birmingham
5.   Edinburgh
All living Away
Parents went to university and graduated with a degree
Siblings: Sean and Akeel Price
Subject: The subject Reiss wants to study is Gaming, Coding, ICT
Languages: Spanish Plans after un: Buy a good house, find a highly paid job with degree, drives
Extracurricular activities: Football player

333 & 450 - list
First Name: Bob

Surname:
Age: 20
Gender: Male
Hobbies: Going out with friends, sports, watching movies
Siblings: 1 sister, 1 brother
Preferred University: Aston
Subject: Audiology
Other University Choices:
1.   Oxford (favourite)
2.   Cambridge -
3.   Yale
4.   Harvard
5.   Birmingham City University
Sandwich Year: Where I'd like to go – Gloucester, or stay in Birmingham
D.O.B. – 27/4/1997
Parent's education: Finished school didn't go to uni
School – Previous subjects: Maths, Science, English, Further Maths and Triple Science
Parent's Annual Income: 206k
Known languages: English, French and Spanish
Skills: How to live alone, cook, make bread, play music
Plans after uni: Get degree, have a family, get a job, travel

Appendix 10 - "If you could ask about University, what would you like to know?"	Financial Management	Application Process	Cost of University	Value of University	Visiting Home	Options and Qualifications besides HE	What is the social side of University like?	Working while studying	Age	Studying for a degree
How do you handle finance?	X									
How does the application process work?		X								
What are acceptances based on?		X								
Is it worth going to university?				X						
Why is uni so pricey?			X							
How do you choose which university to go to?		X								
How often will we be able to visit home if the university is far away?					X					
Will university give you more benefits of getting a good career than another option?				X						
Can i get the same qualifications in university and in an apprenticeship?						X				
What qualifications can I get in an apprenticeship?						X				
Does everyone at university like their friends?							X			
At university is there a lot of extracurricular things to do?							X			
Does some students just stay on campus to live the discrete party life?							X			
Is it costly?			X							
Is it worth it going to a university than doing an apprenticeship?				X						
What else besides grades would you consider putting down to apply to a university?		X								
How would university take to complete?										X
Is university a good choice?				X						
As someone who goes to uni, do you have a lot of spare time on your hands?							X			
Do you need to go to university to be as successful as someone who doesn't?				X						

Question								
What is the highest pay you can get without a degree?					X			
Do you have to pay?		X						
What age do you need to be to attend?								X
What additional benefits does uni give you?			X					
What do yo need to do to get into university?	X							
What do you need to get into an arts academy?					X			
What GCSes or ALevels do you need for this?					X			
What quals do you need?					X			
What additional benefits does university give you?			X					
How often do you get to visit home?				X				
What qualifications do you need to get on an apprenticeship?					X			
How do these differ from the qualifications you get at university?					X			
Are there actually sororities?						X		
Do you have a lot of free time?						X		
How long are the lessons?								X
Are there a lot of extra curricular activities?						X		
Can you get jobs on campus?							X	
Can you get the same qualifications from apprenticeships?					X			
Can you stay on campus?						X		
What do you have to do to get into university?	X							
Do you only study one main thing?								X
If you don't go to university, do you have less chance of getting into a good job or career?			X					
How long would it take me to study Psychology in ALevels and get a job related to it?								X

	The best university	Courses and Qualifications at universities	Changing your mind at University	Studying for a degree	How do I get _____ career?
What are the best universities?	X				
What are the qualifications to get into certain universities and are they different aboard?		X			
What happens if you change your mind about the degree you are learning?			X		
Do all universities do the same courses?		X			
What are the best universities?	X				
What are the qualifications to become a heart surgeon?					X
How many years do I have to study to become a surgeon in university?					X
How many tests do you have to take				X	
How long do I need to study at uni to become a petroleum engineer					X
What degrees do you need to become a petroleum engineer					X
What course do I need to follow a music path?					X