

# Aspirations

## Introduction

Coalition policy proposals construct social mobility in simplistic terms and encourage the view that young people should continually strive to climb the mobility ladder and pursue careers above and beyond those of their parents and extended family. As discussed in chapter 2, *Opening Doors* (HMG, 2011) sets out the government's commitment to ensuring that all young people have the maximum opportunities to realize their potential in the education and labour market. This commitment includes the provision of financial support for the foundation years, school years, transition years and adulthood, to ensure that people from all backgrounds can experience social mobility and fulfil their individual potential. The *Opening Doors* action plan assumes that everyone wishes to seek individual social mobility, and that inequality can be reduced by appropriate reforms. But policy-makers are less clear about what constitutes social mobility from one generation to the next, how mobility can be measured and how mobility might be made possible for all people. This is particularly significant since the number of top jobs compared with the size of the population is relatively limited, and many aspects of mobility are gendered. As we have seen in chapter 2, government conceptualizations of mobility are ubiquitous, problematic and highly individualized.

This chapter examines the respondents' answers to interview questions about their aspirations for the future in terms of their careers and family lives. These questions explored the students' primary concerns for the future, examining their aspirations, motivations and other sources of satisfaction and happiness. We examine five areas of aspiration and consider them in relation to the concepts of habitus and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977a) and also to government views of social mobility.

The five areas of aspiration considered here are happiness, satisfaction, making a difference, status and wealth. These five themes were selected on the basis of the frequency with which they were cited in the interviews and their relevance to the research aims and objectives. The most frequently cited themes relate to happiness and personal satisfaction and to the pursuit of challenging activities that are exciting and rewarding for their own sakes. B group students in both schools placed an even stronger emphasis on family,

happiness and 'getting along' than those in the A groups. B group students expressed a strong desire to please their parents and teachers, but also to be independent and have friends.

### Aspirations

The five aspirations discussed in this chapter are defined below, indicating how we constructed and understood the themes that emerged from the interviews. These definitions are based on our respondents' thoughts about each area:

- Personal and professional happiness: the pursuit and accomplishment of individualized goals and aspirations. These goals related to future employment and aspects of private life, such as having children, in almost equal measure.
- Job satisfaction: having a future career that is challenging and stimulating, where every day is different and the work is demanding and testing.
- Making a difference: the desire to make a positive, measurable impact at work and in some instances the wider local community.
- Status: the drive to gain high-status employment that provides a degree of power and autonomy. It represents a desire for various forms of social mobility.
- Wealth: the accumulation of economic security and wealth and material advantage through a chosen employment pathway.

### Personal and professional happiness

The most dominant theme across the two groups and the two schools related to the respondents' aspirations for personal happiness. This was cited as important by 17 of our sample. The theme of happiness related to respondents' future professional and personal lives; they were keen to obtain future employment and personal circumstances that, amongst other things, would make them happy.

Five students from the South Park A group said they sought happiness in their future work lives. Jason told us that 'in the future, it is having a job that I enjoy and that I reach through hard work, putting effort in and that has paid off in something I enjoy and I can get a good life from'. Noah echoed this sentiment, saying that 'as long as I've worked hard and feel I've been successful and enjoy the job, that's success ... not liking the job is what I fear and so pay is much less important than enjoyment of the job'. Isabella explained that for her, success in the future would be 'job satisfaction and

happiness ... this is what marks successful people. You need enough money to pay for your house and family and a small surplus.' Isabella felt that focusing on either making money or achieving personal gain alone was not as important as seeking happiness. Ian also wanted to be happy with his future work and told us that there would be few benefits to being paid well if the job was dull, and that this would not feel like success to him. Sean too felt that enjoying a job and having job satisfaction would be an important factor for his future success.

All of these students are from economically privileged family backgrounds and their parents hold rewarding, professional employment. They all described happy family backgrounds where they were valued and supported economically, educationally and emotionally. Jason's parents have academic jobs at the local university, Noah's parents have professional private sector jobs, Isabella's parents are scientists, Sean's are professors and Irene's are musicians. Their dispositions towards paid employment emphasize the importance of securing both economic wealth and happiness in their professional and private lives. The similarities in their dispositions, which are influenced by a middle-class background, suggest a shared habitus that prioritizes high occupational status and seeks a more satisfying experience of work.

Six students from the South Park B group had similar aspirations to secure happiness as an important part of their future success. Jasmine and Anna desired happiness in their professional and private lives. This desire was again strongly influenced by their family milieu. Jasmine told us that her family life is quite advantaged:

We have not been affected at all by the recession ... we are not financially badly off. I don't think my gender makes a difference as I'm one of three girls, and my mum was the one who has encouraged me and my sisters most of all [...] My mum says don't do it for the money, do it for the love of it. She believes if you enjoy it you should do it, not because it pays well. I think it is a good outlook for life, if you don't enjoy it, you shouldn't do it.

Anna's family had influenced her thinking too, particularly her sister who was undertaking a course that she really enjoyed. Anna felt that she would much rather 'do something I enjoy ... I'd sooner do something I enjoy rather than something I don't. It's what I'm happy with for my future.' In contrast to Jasmine, Anna comes from a large and economically disadvantaged family, and has experienced hardships and constraints as a result. Anna's aspirations for future happiness reflect a working-class habitus, where there may be a

greater tendency to focus on happiness as an end in itself rather than on more middle-class, competitive, and high-status professional outcomes. But Jasmine's aspiration for happiness at work is inconsistent with such generalizations and confirms Bourdieu's (1977a) view of habitus as generative and structuring but also as disruptive and agentic, depending on the nuances of the family context.

The remaining four South Park B group respondents also aspired to gain happiness in their future employment. Gavin wanted to secure financial independence but also personal happiness, identifying this as an important marker of his future success. Freddie sought financial stability for his future children so that he could provide for them and treat them well. He wanted a life of happiness with them and so, while he would work hard pursuing his dream of opening his own restaurant, he would also prioritize family time. Nathan had a vision of achieving 'a perfect job, for example as a film director. I want to direct good films, make good money and have the perfect family life.' Finally, Isaac wanted to pursue a job in animal management that he acknowledged might not pay well, but would provide him with happiness. He told us that there is 'no point living a future you hate every day ... it's much better to have a job you like instead of moaning all the time about your work'. With the exception of Nathan, these students had parents in working-class, semi-skilled occupations, and their families had struggled financially. All four students reported happy home lives and wanted to reproduce this in their future. Their dispositions show 'an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour', which in this instance inclines them to seek to reproduce the family milieu (Bourdieu, 1990: 77).

The key difference between South Park's A group and B group students' aspirations for future personal and professional happiness relates to the social class backgrounds they reported. The desire for happiness in the future may reflect the students' desire to reproduce the family and professional milieus they experienced in their formative years. The social class of the family may be less significant than its stability and contentment.

Only two students in the Felix Holt A group told us that personal happiness was important for their future success. Andrew explained that for him:

Success will be measured in terms of how I feel. So, if I get to the stage where I've made it as a photographer or conservationist, and I feel happy and content with what I'm doing, then for me, that's a measure of success ... to enjoy what you are doing at the present moment. How are you successful if you are not happy?

Andrew also had a supportive family background that he described as follows:

My family has been a big influence, my mum especially. I've had a lot of influence from her. She's an illustrator doing a master's and she's been conscious to help me, take me to multiple trips to places. I couldn't have asked for more.

Rachael also valued career success and, whilst she had not yet worked out the details of her plans, she was keen that her future should involve pursuing a challenging career that uses foreign languages, because this would make her happy: 'to me success is about being happy in what you are doing and having a new challenge every day'. Rachael's family milieu was supportive and nurturing:

I come from a middle-class family, quite privileged in terms of things I get from my parents and I find no barriers, only opportunities, thanks to family members who help me get a foot in the world of work.

Rachael's habitus seems influenced by well-connected parents who value education, enjoy professional careers and are generally happy and contented in their personal and professional lives.

Four of the Felix Holt B group students thought of happiness as an integral component of their future success. Holly explained that she wanted to secure a job:

in the zoo industry ... I'd like to be comfortable enough to live and perhaps to move out of my house so I'm not relying on my parents as much, maybe rent a house. To be successful in the future it is important to be happy and to be comfortable with where I'm at in my life, particularly in my relationships.

Tania also wanted employment that would make her happy and she wanted to 'spend the rest of my life doing something I really love'. Lauren wanted to gain a good degree and secure employment. She wanted work that would make her happy: 'I don't necessarily need to be too comfortable but I want to make enough so I can have the necessities of life, but the main thing is to be happy'. Dean was keen to gain secure employment that provided a degree of financial security, but happiness and enjoyment were more important to him than getting to the top.

There are clearly some differences between the A and B groups within each school and between the two schools in terms of family background, values and culture in relation to the theme of happiness, but there are

similarities as well. The aspiration for future happiness raises some questions about the influence of social class on the individual and the aspiration to achieve social mobility. These respondents were interested in making enough money to live comfortably and have the necessities they needed for life, but this would be constructed as a success only if they were happy with their personal lives and future jobs. So, without happiness, the value of money and job security would diminish.

These accounts can be read in multiple ways and could be taken as a reflection of the naivety of youth, the value and importance of a secure and happy family life, or as evidence of latent individualism. Regardless of the plurality of possible meanings and interpretations, what is striking is their mismatch with the construction of social mobility articulated in *Opening Doors*, which pays no attention to the importance of happiness in young people's views of career success. There is no acknowledgement that being happy at work is important for overall well-being and that this happiness should have a role in social mobility policy. The government focus on unleashing potential and breaking down barriers to high-status, high-mobility careers is at variance with our respondents' talk about their future plans. The 17 respondents considered here were not expressing a desire to become socially mobile in their careers, but were more concerned with reproducing their current position. This is shown by their desire to earn enough money to ensure security, and to have interesting, stimulating and challenging forms of work, but, crucially, to experience a happy work and personal life.

The interview data suggests that the aspirations, desires and dreams articulated by our respondents in relation to personal happiness may be an obstacle to social mobility. These respondents are not seeking to move beyond their parents' occupations in terms of objective status. Subjectively they need to feel that there is an emotional value to the work they are planning to do in the future, not just an economic or status value. This point is further illustrated in the following discussion of the importance of job satisfaction.

### Job satisfaction

For six respondents, achieving job satisfaction was mentioned as an important element of their desired success. This motive was more evident amongst the students at Felix Holt, with only Sean from the South Park A group telling us that 'having an interesting job is quite important' in terms of his future. Sean's parents are both professors and thus have high-status professional careers. He said that his parents had discussed the importance of job satisfaction with him and had attempted to impress upon him the value of a job that would

provide satisfaction as well as financial security. Only one of the South Park B group students specifically identified job satisfaction as a future aspiration.

Only two students from the Felix Holt A group referred to a desire for job satisfaction. Adele explained that she wanted to secure a job where 'I know I'm going to learn something different, something new each day'. Adele felt she would find the process of learning something new every day deeply satisfying and that job satisfaction was an important dimension of success. Graham also wanted access to a job that would provide satisfaction and told us that 'salary is really not too important for me; I'm going into a programming-based job, could go into loads of areas, e.g. game design, software development, robotics – I'd be interested in all of those'. He was keen to ensure that his future would be spent in a job that was interesting and stimulating rather than one that would simply provide wealth, status or upward mobility.

Three students from the Felix Holt B group talked about the importance of job satisfaction. Nick was excited by the idea of a job that would require him to live on the edge: 'I want to be doing something not in an office, but meeting interesting characters, I want new experiences all the time, not 9 to 5 every day ... that would provide me with job satisfaction which is important to me'. Claudia had similar aspirations for a job that would enable her to be:

doing something satisfying and it needs to be out of the ordinary ... Not the same routine each day but something spontaneous. This would make me feel I was fulfilling my potential and making sure I achieve my potential each day.

Molly told us that she was not making plans for five years' time but hopes to be in an enjoyable job:

I'm a lifeguard in the sports centre and I like it but I don't want to be doing that for the rest of my life ... I can't see me doing that in my thirties. I want a mature and satisfying job that's interesting.

All of the Felix Holt students who talked about the importance of job satisfaction had parents with reasonably high-status occupations, including as an accountant, engineer and underwriter. Thus, the respondents' habitus and dispositions are framed by their parents' professional lives, and this framing is reflected in their own desires for the future (Bourdieu, 1993b). For example, Claudia's father was a policeman who enjoyed his job and got a lot of satisfaction from serving his local community. He was a significant role model for Claudia and his experiences had inspired her to seek job satisfaction, suggesting that her dispositions were prompting choices for the

future that led towards social reproduction. Nick's father was an engineer working in a highly professional environment that he found demanding and satisfying. Like Claudia, Nick's habitus and dispositions were influenced by his father's positive experiences of work and the subjective value he attached to his employment.

Our respondents' desire for occupations that will provide them with opportunities for job satisfaction is, again, entirely absent from policy-makers' expectations. These latter pay little attention to the importance of working in a challenging and stimulating environment. Policy assumes instead that upward mobility involves achieving financial mobility, status and the accompanying access to power (HMG, 2011). This theme again highlights the mismatch between the government's view of mobility and those raised by some of our respondents.

### Making a difference

Three students from South Park A group, one in the Felix Holt A group and one member of the Felix Holt B group said they aspired to future employment that would enable them to make a positive difference and have a positive impact on their environment. Making a difference was an aspiration with a noticeably gendered dynamic. Four of the five respondents who hoped to make a difference in order to feel successful in the future were females. They resembled the 'good girls' in studies that explore the operation and impact of femininity on school-age girls who are selfless, caring and nurturing and who seek to bring happiness to those around them as a way of realizing their own happiness (Francis, 2000; Skelton and Francis, 2009).

Three members of the South Park A group wanted to make a difference. Zoey told us that her future success could be realized only if she had made a difference in some sort of way, and that this would bring her happiness: 'as long as I've made a contribution to the world, even if it's tiny, I'll feel I've been successful'. Emma sought to make a difference for herself, but also to make her family feel proud of her. She said that:

If I can make my family proud I will really feel I've achieved something. I want to make a difference. For example, I was in a show and it was nice for my family to come and say how proud they were of me, it made a difference to them.

Ellie explained that for her, future success was also about making people feel happy, which would in turn make her feel happy. She wanted to 'get to the place where you want to be, feeling you mean something to other people,



## *Kate Hoskins and Bernard Barker*

the world'. She was keen to pursue a career that could enable her to make a positive difference to people's lives.

In the Felix Holt A group, only Rob said he wanted to pursue a future career that would make a difference. He was somewhat philosophical in his discussion about this and said that:

Einstein said you should measure true success by the value you give back to wider society. For me that carries significant value. So you don't see many millionaire or impossibly rich scientists and that fits with me and my desire to be a scientist. Since I was very young, I've always been more interested in influencing the future of humanity rather than getting rich myself; I shan't complain if I get rich but it isn't my primary goal.

Rob was altruistic in his hopes and plans for the future and was highly committed to pursuing a future in science. His parents were in professional occupations with his father working in IT and his mother as a teacher. Their influence on him was clearly a factor shaping his aspirations for the future; they wanted him to find work that would enable him to make a difference.

Holly was the only member of the Felix Holt B group who mentioned that she wanted to make a difference, in her case by working 'in the zoo industry ... doing something in relation to conservation is important to me, building up and breeding rare species and then introducing them into the wild'.

These examples illustrate the complexity of the habitus and dispositions within our sample and show that the combination of family values and individual aspirations provides space for agency and difference, despite the potential impact of structural inequalities. Whilst making a difference is a gendered and feminized aspiration held predominantly by girls who want to give back to the community, its presence among the aspirations of the students does also point to a more community-aware and collaborative view of success. This in turn confirms that not all young people have the same goals and desires for the future, and that not all young people are as individually focused and selfish as they are often represented.

## **Status**

However, there are several students in our sample who defined their future happiness in relation to maintaining, obtaining and securing future status and power. Only students at South Park (in both the A and B groups) referred to a concern with gaining status. All those aspiring to secure future employment status were male.

Alaster told us that he was 'excited by the opportunity of getting into medicine, and the status it will confer ... It's a very different profession from those pursued by my family who are very old-fashioned and normal; my Dad's a salesman.' Alaster was a significant respondent in our sample as he was one of the small number of students who said he wanted to obtain higher occupational status than his family. He aspired to achieve objective, linear and rational social mobility of the type envisaged in government policy documents.

Elijah was also keen to gain a high-profile and high-status job. He was interested in pursuing a 'technical job, like economics, or even international relations ... I want to do something that has a high profile and I want to study difficult subjects. For me success will eventually mean being a professional in one of these careers.' Elijah's parents, unlike Alaster's, both had high-status professional careers. Bourdieu argues that habitus emerges through primary socialization, that is:

[a] practical evaluation of the likelihood of the success of a given action in a given situation which brings into play a whole body of wisdom, sayings, commonplaces, ethical precepts (that's not for the likes of us).

(Bourdieu, 1977a: 487).

Elijah's habitus and dispositions were influenced by high-status academic achievements that were an important dimension of his family milieu and had shaped his desire to achieve a similar, even elevated, status in his own future. He identified a professional career as something appropriate and attainable for him.

Julian, from the South Park B group, also wanted a job with status. His preference, like Elijah's, was influenced by his family background. He told us that 'from a young age I've wanted to be a policeman ... My granddad was a policeman, which influenced me a lot, and I really like the idea of working up the ranks to a higher-status position.' Julian was from an advantaged background and it was not surprising, therefore, that although he was happy to enter the police force in a relatively junior position, he said he wants to climb the career ladder and gain a senior position. His comments indicate that he possesses valued forms of social and cultural capital, including access to networks, cultural resources and experiences and appropriate family values to assist him in his pursuit of status. He voiced a high level of confidence and assurance in himself and in his future success.

These respondents' desire for status may not represent a conscious wish for social mobility but is nevertheless consistent with Gove's wish to

produce a more meritocratic society. Their commitment to gaining status and power in their careers indicates an ambition to achieve an individual outcome and advantage for individual benefit.

## **Wealth**

The fifth theme discussed in this chapter relates to the respondents' aspirations to achieve economic wealth. Three of the Felix Holt B group and one of the A group were keen on finding careers that would deliver material wealth. They were motivated to ensure their future financial security partly because they had all experienced financial hardship at home. Tania wanted to 'move up and get the money, I like the money associated with veterinary'. Similarly Dave felt that for his future success 'earning more money is very important to me'. Simon was keen to:

make a comfortable amount of money, not sure about going to the very top, not the way I work, but I wouldn't complain if I did, but I like hands-on work, where I communicate with people. I can be a good team leader, depending on the tasks, and it would be a nice route to get there (to the top).

Darren had his sights on a successful football career and was aware of the financial rewards attached to that:

Next year I'm hoping to play for the first team; [at a previous club] I got paid £10 per week; in the reserves I don't get paid, but in the first team I get an average of £250 and the captain gets £750. There's better chances and you have to believe in yourself.

Kylie, an A group respondent, told us that 'I don't know what I want to do as a job, but I know I want to be well off ... that would be a success'. They were not necessarily aware of the job they wanted to do, but they were keen to secure high earnings.

Darren and Tania told us it was important to them to move upwards and secure greater financial rewards than their parents. They reflected the sentiment that hard work and desire will be enough to secure the financial rewards they are seeking. Like those respondents who sought upward mobility and status, they fully believe that success and failure rest entirely with the individual. Their responses do not acknowledge the sorts of bonding and bridging social capital exploited by the middle classes, who have access to particular networks and resources and who gain, for example, high-status internships, privileged academic pathways and employment prospects (Putnam, 1995). This leads the respondents to emphasize their individual

agency above all other elements of becoming successful. Their status as agentic, choosing subjects form the root of their belief in the meritocratic possibilities provided by their state education, family backgrounds and belief in themselves.

Only one respondent from the South Park B group openly discussed his desire to make as much money as he could, and acknowledged that he was strongly motivated by the desire to accumulate wealth in the future. Ross told us that:

I would have to place myself as lower than my Dad, who got a degree in quantity surveying, and he now shares a company with three other people ... he used to have his own quantity surveying company. I would like my Dad's money ... I suppose I'd like to do better than my parents and definitely want to earn more money and get the qualifications I need to be able to carry on ... There are no obstacles holding me back.

Like Alaster, Ross was keen to move beyond his parents' economic position and so gain a form of social mobility. Despite his view that there are no obstacles in his path, the likelihood of him achieving the wealth he desired was uncertain: Ross was predicted C grades in his forthcoming examinations. Yet despite this potential constraint, he presented himself as highly ambitious and displayed a keen sense of individualism regarding his future success. He was single-minded and focused on achieving his goals of making money and attaining the kind of financial independence that his father had managed to secure.

Ross's desire to obtain a level of wealth and employment mobility that would take him beyond his parents' present occupational status is in keeping with the government's conception of social mobility. Ross articulated individualized goals for his future that centre on economic and professional mobility and are in line with Gove's aspirations for young people. Ross may be constrained in the early stages of his career if his actual examination grades are as predicted, but his motives may well carry him forward all the same. He seemed untroubled by such thoughts.

### **Aspirations**

Five areas of aspiration influence our respondents' constructions and understandings of what will constitute future success. Respondents identified other aspirations, but these tended to relate to gaining the qualifications necessary for preferred post-compulsory educational pathways. The subjective motives selected for discussion here illustrate the extent to which the majority of respondents expressed desires for the future at variance with

the assumptions made by policy-makers. However, there were also some examples of goals and aims that resonate with government policy, including the desire for status and the desire for material wealth. Whilst these were mentioned by a very small number of respondents, their inclusion exemplifies the range of responses we encountered.

This chapter has shown that, whilst status and wealth are important to some of the respondents, a critical mass disavows these as goals for years to come and very few respondents expressed a hint of dissatisfaction with their family background or lifestyle. Some were inclined to equate the notion of 'success' with choice and the freedom to pursue personal goals and interests but, as argued in chapters 3 and 4, the idea of rising beyond parents and family in terms of professional position, status and/or wealth was almost entirely absent from the interviews, and very few respondents expressed a desire to 'climb ladders' and rise up beyond their parents. Where there was evidence of this desire it reflected a wish to ensure their future financial security, a motive often stemming from experiences of financial hardship. Our sample's vocational access and aspirations seem to be woven into their family environment, and in general to match their academic ability. The students' reflections provide, therefore, a large number of examples of the transmission of cultural capital and evidence of social reproduction.

For most respondents the important thing is to have sufficient money to do interesting things and to take part in enriching activities. Very able respondents (i.e. A group students) were particularly strong in expressing a desire to be part of an inclusive community, rather than to live in a privileged 'bubble'. Their competitiveness seems to relate to GCSE examinations and sport, rather than to the social world beyond the school.

Female and male students were equally likely to stress personal happiness, family priorities and contentment with intrinsically rewarding careers. Female and male students also stressed happiness and intrinsic work fulfilment rather than a desire to acquire wealth for its own sake, and often described themselves as interested in money only in so far as it enables choices. However, it is noticeable that the majority of students who want to make a difference to other people's lives are female, while those seeking status are male, indicating some gendered differences (Skelton and Francis, 2009).

This chapter has shown that by far the most common and significant aspiration amongst our respondents is the achievement of personal and professional happiness. Discussion of the first three aspirations shows the limitations of government ideas about mobility that emphasize employment status and the pursuit of wealth and neglect the important role of happiness, fulfilment and making a positive difference.

## Chapter 6

# Choosing the future

### Introduction

We have seen that our students have many school experiences and attitudes that are consistent with policy-making assumptions about social mobility. At both schools most students described themselves as hardworking, competitive individuals eager to progress to the best possible grades and successful working careers. They perceived the future as being in their own hands and dismissed the idea that there are constraints on what can be achieved. They saw their 'landscapes of choice' as individualized and unfettered by underlying structures (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

Ethnicity, gender and class were barely mentioned, except to dismiss the possibility that they could be sources of hindrance. Only two students (at South Park) commented on unequal opportunity within the school system. The government has no need to 'challenge low aspirations and expectations' at Felix Holt or South Park because the students have internalized almost completely the idea of their own individual responsibility and believe that qualifications are an important route to career success. Respondents emphasized the extent to which they were encouraged and challenged to succeed by their teachers, who were often cited as role models. The schools organize Key Stage 4 (KS4) work experience for all students; Felix Holt also provides similar opportunities in Key Stage 5 (KS5). There is abundant evidence that teachers intervene to ensure appropriate placements for individuals, regardless of ability or relative advantage/disadvantage. An assistant head at Felix Holt, with oversight of the sixth form, was emphatic about the work done to encourage students to aim for the best universities:

We know the amount of work and effort needed to get into Russell Group universities; it is about giving kids the right advice. Too much says go to university, while there can be too little on the type of university. I have a concern that people come into teaching for different reasons – some have a pastoral view that is important for the disadvantaged but sometimes what is lacking is academic rigour; to say you can aim higher. I came into teaching because I wanted people to go to Oxford.

There is a shared perception across both schools that all students, of whatever ability and background, can achieve their full potential and progress towards appropriate and worthwhile careers. The inclusive congeniality and good reputations of South Park and Felix Holt seem to have led respondents to believe in their own unrestrained agency and opportunities – the world is their oyster – and to confirm the individualist hypothesis that suitably reformed schools may transcend the unequal structures that feature in so much of the literature on youth and careers (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Ball *et al.*, 2000).

However, this evidence in support of individualized, rational models of student choice, academic success and career progression is balanced by other indicators that provide less support for the notion that equal opportunities necessarily contribute to increased social mobility. We have seen how family culture and interests precondition respondents' developing identities and self-image, help shape the pathways they find attractive and influence their subject choices. Almost all students said they were content with the lifestyle and culture embodied in their homes and parents. Occasional reservations were expressed about one or other parent, but no respondent said they were at odds with their home and the values and goals espoused by close relatives. Respondents described future success in terms of personal and family happiness, job satisfaction, making a difference, and having an adequate income to support modest family needs. Many students explicitly rejected the idea of striving for wealth and upward mobility. Although participants reported themselves as individual agents with few impediments to desired goals, they also described themselves as active, positive members of valued families and their local communities.

This chapter aims to review the extent to which social mobility policy expectations are justified by the evidence gathered in this study about our students' choices of academic and career pathways. Do high-performing schools like South Park and Felix Holt provide a secure foundation for hardworking, upwardly mobile young people, enabling them to transcend disadvantage, humble origins and/or dysfunctional family circumstances? Can an extra £2.5 billion investment through the Pupil Premium 'radically improve their educational outcomes' (HMG, 2011: 6)? Or does it remain true that 'deep-seated inequalities in the British labour market' steer young people towards divergent career paths and trajectories based on their levels of accreditation (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996: 7)?

We analysed the 88 interview transcripts for evidence that:

- Students have clear, rational understandings of available options, routes and pathways through secondary and higher education, training and the workplace.
- Students' 'horizons for action' have broadened to include progressive pathways and trajectories, associated with aspirational 'careership' routes not taken by other family members nor in past generations (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996).
- Choices and outcomes transcend disadvantage and other unequal structures, with family patterns and influences less significant for our sample's career and life planning than for the urban cohort investigated by Ball *et al.* (2000).

This chapter draws on additional data from the Felix Holt Family Employment History (Appendix 2). The 42 sixth form students at Felix Holt each filled in a simple form to indicate his or her own current vocational aspiration and the remembered occupations of their grandparents and parents. Although incomplete and at times fragmentary, Appendix 2 provides valuable contextual information that improves our understanding of how families influence individual career choices and contribute to social fluidity.

Our data is discussed below in the context of five main themes that emerge from our interviews: (1) school structures that individualize, sort and label; (2) family patterns and influences on occupational preferences; (3) students' realism and risk management as they negotiate academic and work careers; (4) obstacles to assessing and achieving upward mobility; and (5) fluidity and stability through school and family.

### School structures

Our respondents belong to a generation that entered the school system in New Labour's high summer. They have been more extensively tested and examined than any previous cohort of English school students, and have been subject to an intensive hyper-accountability regime supposed to increase efficiency and performance (Mansell, 2007). School and external assessments have provided detailed, continuous feedback on their achievements (or lack thereof) from an early age, and have conditioned expectations through repeated assessment cycles. At South Park and Felix Holt, students are given predicted grades and targets in every subject and their progress is monitored closely, with appropriate interventions to remedy slippage as and when required.



*South Park*

Lily and Ian reflected on the pressure generated by continual assessment, monitoring and feedback, and illustrated the extent to which their lives have been dominated by marks, grades and their future significance:

Ian: We have minimum target grades you are supposed to achieve on your worst day but you are expected to do better. It is hard when the minimum target grades are A\*. In some subjects I'm not getting there but teachers seem to think A\* is my minimum and chase me up and ask why I'm not.

Lily: In some subjects I'm above target, in some subjects on it, and in others I'm not achieving it. It's not due to lack of effort.

Ian: The minimum is set in stone too early, so they don't know how well you can do.

Lily: It's based on your year 6 SATs<sup>1</sup>. Because of earlier good marks you can struggle to reach the target and marks can drop drastically.

Ian: In English I was really pleased with my A-grade reading and listening marks, but the teacher called me in and said it wasn't good enough.

Despite an occasional sense of injustice about a particular mark or teacher comment, the GCSE candidates at South Park accepted the feedback they were given and worked hard to match the high expectations designed into the process. Elijah, for example, said:

To know that I've done well, to get good feedback, it gives that confidence you are on the right track for what you are seeking. When you get to sixth form, you've got to know the difference between going in the right or wrong direction.

Adam's attitude was typical of the A group at South Park. Determined to succeed, he accepted full responsibility for his examination results and adopted long-term plans to improve:

It's all about taking little steps towards my big goals, like getting GCSEs, for example, controlled assessments in Spanish help you to be sure you can do the small things towards the best overall grade. In the future I'll have to think about adapting my work ethic so I can get into the best university I can; I need to be more focused –

I'm not sure how big a gap there is between GCSE and A level and must prepare for a worst case scenario.

Respondents were in the process of applying for sixth form colleges, so their comments often reflected their awareness of the implications of their subject choices, both for university entrance and for future careers. Although their course selections arose mainly from intrinsic interest and personal enjoyment, they were also keen not to close doors. Faith, for example, said she had a strong interest in the performing arts but was careful to pick 'subjects that show I am academic'. Lily was pretty confident that she wanted to work in a special school, especially after an enjoyable work experience, but nevertheless chose psychology amongst her A levels to 'keep your options broad'.

B group students were no less persuaded by the validity of their predicted grades and targets, and no less keen to work hard to improve. Samantha said she hoped 'to exceed my minimum target grades. I'm down for Cs but hope to get the Bs to get me into sixth form college.' Anna was headed for a vocational course in childcare but saw success as hitting targets and achieving required grades. Alice told us that 'I can't focus in exams, I struggle, I'm a person who learns by doing rather than listening' but was determined to secure the D and C grades needed for entry to the FE college course for the uniformed services. Isaac was headed towards another vocational course but told us firmly that 'I'm very determined to push myself to the highest limits to get what I want and deserve'. Julian praised South Park because when he joined 'I was expected to get just passes but I've improved because the teachers have pushed me and kept me working hard, because they knew I had potential'.

Students at South Park were acutely conscious, therefore, of their assessment data and acknowledged the impact of predicted and actual GCSE grades on their embryonic plans. Without exception, A group students oriented themselves towards the more selective of the two sixth form colleges, while B group members were aligned with the less-selective option or the local FE college, with most hoping for admission to vocational courses. Almost all South Park students described post-16 goals that were strongly influenced by realism about their qualification prospects, and most also had well-developed occupational preferences. Test and examination results, student grouping strategies and binary curriculum structures seem to play their part in creating distinctive academic and vocational tracks, evident in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1: Student tracks at South Park**

Cohort	Number of students	Typical estimated GCSE results
High academic track	24	A* grades
Academic track	3	B grades
Creative academic or creative vocational track	2	C grades
Vocational track	17	B-E grades
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	

All 24 A group members at South Park, expected to achieve straight A\* grades at GCSE, were strongly committed to the 'high academic track', with Oxbridge and Russell Group universities in their sights. Their self-confidence and expectations for the future were notably high, reflecting a long history of success in tests and examinations from primary school onwards. Rose, for example, intimated that 'success for me at school is getting 11A\* grades in the summer and that's in line with my predicted grades ... Success for me would be getting into Cambridge University and going on to have an outstanding academic career.' Hannah was equally confident, commenting that she'd 'like to pursue a career in medicine; my aspirations are to get good grades, go to a top sixth form college then get to a good university, there is no ceiling on my dream of becoming a doctor'. Zoey's goal was also straightforward: she plans to follow a first degree with PhD research into high-energy physics or marine biology. Isabella wanted 'high grades to go to prestigious universities'. She said:

I'm thinking about doing a degree that opens more doors into higher-rated jobs. You always want the best you can possibly get, you use on-line rankings to check out universities, find the places you want to go.

Alaster presented as exceptionally confident and ambitious. He hoped to be a doctor because 'that's the ultimate goal, no-one in my family is medical - I want to do something worthwhile and change the world, creating something or finding something out that will save and change lives'.

By contrast, B group members were already adapting to scaled-down, less-prestigious ambitions (in the cases of those estimated to attain B/C grades) or less-favoured colleges and/or vocational goals (in the case of those estimated to attain D/E grades). Julian said he had wanted to be a policeman

from an early age; Carl hoped to be accepted on a level 2 football coaching course; Patrick wanted to be a plumber; Jordan said he struggles at school but hopes to be accepted at the FE college to follow a level 3 sports and leisure award. Freddie needed at least a B grade to embark on a professional cookery diploma at the FE college. Cathy expected to achieve mainly C grades but hoped to study for an art diploma at the less selective sixth form college. Anna has struggled with 'loads of writing' and already had an interview scheduled for a place on a childcare course at the FE college. Sandy couldn't wait to leave school and planned to combine an apprenticeship with a hairdressing course at FE college. The year 11 pastoral leader said these career choices were due to the disproportionate number of students in the lower percentiles 'who haven't seen working life modelled'. He felt that 'lower down the scale, more and more there is a complete lack of aspiration'.

All this is consistent with the conclusion that basic decisions about education and work are firm and quite stable by the early teenage years, although many students adjust their expectations downwards with growing knowledge of likely GCSE results and awareness of entry requirements for particular options (Rojewski and Kim, 2003). After 15,000 hours<sup>2</sup> of hyper-accountability teaching and testing, it is less than surprising that young people have a clear and early understanding of their position in the academic and occupational 'pecking order' (Furlong and Biggart, 1999). Group A students consolidate their positions on a flexible and relatively open-ended 'high academic' track, with a small number holding the possibility of a slightly less prestigious university in reserve. Continuous examination success enables A group students to delay work decisions and to hone preferences between well-paid professional possibilities, but relatively less successful B group members with middle (B/C) and lower (D/E) grades find that options narrow rapidly as they acquire less-transferable, less-regarded skills. They are steered towards vocational courses, many of them gendered on traditional lines, especially for girls (e.g. childcare, hairdressing, art). This illustrates the extent to which gender intersects with social class to limit the possibilities for some students (Brah and Phoenix, 2004).

### *Felix Holt*

Selective admission arrangements and a significant age difference reduce the validity of direct comparisons between the pathways chosen by students at the two schools, especially those followed by the B group sample. Respondents at Felix Holt are on average two years older than those at South Park and were selected for the sixth form on the basis of their GCSE results. For admission to post-16 courses, students have to achieve five passes at grades

A\*-C, including English or Mathematics. The normal entry requirement for an A level or vocational course, as set out in the school's Admissions Policy for the Sixth Form, is a B or a merit in that subject at GCSE/level 2. As a result the Felix Holt B group is less representative of the school's year 7 entry than the B group at South Park. Over thirty students are recruited each year from other schools, adding to the size and viability of the post-16 enrolment but also contributing an unknown but probably favourable addition to the relative quality of the student body. Felix Holt students in both groups were completing rather than choosing their sixth-form courses, and had substantially greater experience of advanced study, work placements and part-time employment. They were also more mature and so better able to offer insight into their journeys through school and college towards higher education or the workplace.

**Table 6.2: Student tracks at Felix Holt**

Cohort	Number of students	Typical estimated A level results
High academic track	12	11 students estimated A grades 1 student estimated B grades
Academic track	14	6 students estimated A 4 students estimated B 4 students estimated C
Creative academic Or Creative vocational track	5	Mainly estimated C grades
Vocational track	11	Mainly estimated C-D grades
Total	42	

Despite these limitations, Table 6.2 shows a marked contrast between A group and B group destinations resembling that observed at South Park (see Table 6.1, p. 110). All but one of the A group members had a laser-like focus on Oxbridge or Russell Group universities while B group students spanned the spectrum from less-prestigious universities to direct employment. With additional A-level and vocational qualifications behind them, Felix Holt students had stronger expectations of the job market than the 16-year-old school leavers at South Park, but the difference between 'high academic' 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks is nevertheless striking and significant

The 'academic' track, relatively under-populated at South Park, was more important at Felix Holt, where 14 students were doubtful about their grades and eager to choose less challenging universities.

Predicted and actual examination results<sup>3</sup> emerged as a strong influence on academic and career decisions, with students generally more concerned with university offers and their own prior track record than with internal monitoring and targets. Respondents on the 'high academic' track were clear about their goals. Rachael, for example, said that she would like to go to Durham University: 'I need AAB; I'd prefer to get higher than that, because it is important to me to work hard to show I've achieved at A level.' Graham was content with AAB to secure a place at Birmingham while Jack seemed happy with an A\*AA offer to study chemistry at Oxford, believing that it 'should be relatively easy because all I need is B in the last chemistry module'. Gemma needed A\*AA to read veterinary science at Cambridge and seemed relatively untroubled by the challenge.

'Academic' track students, including six group A members expected to achieve good grades, were less confident about their chances of making the grade. Lucy had not expected her offer from the University of East Anglia to be so high (AAB) while Marilyn said her estimated grades (ABC) were lower than her offer from Winchester (ABB). Mary was so concerned about her prospects that she gave up going out and limited her work at Tesco to make more time for revision. She needed A/B grades to study physiotherapy at Bournemouth or Coventry. Tania was frustrated that her estimated grades (ABD) were below what was required for veterinary medicine and was working on various strategies, including retaking below-par subjects or switching to a more accessible degree course. Other students, like Darren, were repeating courses and hoped to squeeze into universities via the clearing system, in his case to study sports science in preparation for becoming a personal trainer.

Some B group students, like Matt, were following vocation-related courses that led to university. He hoped to study business with market relations at a post-1992 university and to progress to an internship, possibly with Coca-Cola or Cadbury. Others, like Nick, were simply eager to leave school and 'start earning rather than living off my parents'. He didn't want to go to university or stay in education and had thoughts of starting a business linked to technology-based industry, where his A levels in electronics, computing, physics and business should be useful. Tony felt that getting out to work would be the better option for him, especially when university fees are going up. Dave also hoped for a job straight from school, in his case with the police. He told us he has never 'fancied' university and chose the sixth

form because his friends were there and because the police recruitment age meant that he had a year to fill.

Vocational-track students pursued a variety of employment opportunities, sometimes related to their part-time jobs, as they adapted to the possibility that their grades (C/D) would not help them to secure places in higher education, or concluded that further study would be unproductive for them (see Table 6.3).

Students have a personal history, attitudes and interests that influence their decisions, but expected examination results seem to be a critical factor in prompting 'ideal' and often ambitious choices, and also in persuading some to limit their hopes to a small number of acceptable alternatives (Gottfredson, 2002). Those with minimal risk of academic failure (A group) overwhelmingly aim for prestigious universities and occupations, while those who perceive themselves to be at risk of not achieving required grades (many members of the B group, but also less-confident A group students) have lower occupational aspirations (Patton and Creed, 2007).

Table 6.3: Vocational track intentions at Felix Holt

Student	Employment intention	Expected grade	Track
Harry	Tesco (chain supermarket)	BTEC	Vocational
Dave	Police	C	Vocational
Tony	Accountant	C	Vocational
Simon	Media producer	C	Vocational
Nick	Self-employment	C/D	Vocational
Layla	Trader	C/D	Vocational
Mary	Physiotherapy	A/B	Vocational+
Holly	Zookeeper	C	Vocational+
Dean	Advertising/marketing	C	Vocational+
Joyce	Groom, equine studies	C	Vocational+
Darren	Personal trainer	C/D	Vocational+

The 'higher academic' (A group), 'academic' (mainly upper B group) and 'vocational' (mainly B group) tracks identified at South Park (16+) and Felix Holt (18+) illustrate the ways in which internal school processes, including assessment, curriculum structures, feedback and guidance, contribute powerfully to students' perceptions of their identity and self-efficacy, and condition their aspirations and choices. These students have been individualized, developed, labelled and sorted, with well-defined accreditation tracks shaping and channelling their ambition and future opportunities. An

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RE teacher at Felix Holt suggested that students tend to accept where they have been positioned on the strength of KS2 test scores, with the result that 'the kids in the lower sets aren't really aware they can achieve high'. She claimed that testing and tracking limit young people's aspirations.

### Family employment patterns and influences

Social mobility policy would be right to emphasize the role of education in opening doors for all, regardless of background, provided these internal school processes operate fairly and rationally, so that individual agents could develop their abilities to the full and choose appropriate career goals, unconstrained by other, less-visible variables and influences. The scope for improved upward mobility mainly depends on the extent to which high quality academies, like South Park and Felix Holt, produce self-sufficient, equal opportunity environments, where everyone with a modicum of ability can work hard and make rational, progressive decisions, unhindered by 'the circumstances of their birth; the home they're born into ... or the jobs their parents do' (Nick Clegg in HMG, 2011: 3, quoted above).

As related in chapter 3, our respondents believe strongly in their own agency and responsibility, and regard the apparent limitations of income and personal circumstances as challenges to overcome rather than as constraints on future opportunity. This is consistent with two ESRC studies of South London students born between 1979 and 1980. Respondents viewed their decision-making in terms of individual choice, rather than as the result of structured constraints. Young people blamed themselves for their lack of success and seemed to embrace a culture of individualism prompted by, and interrelated with, social changes that foster increased reflexivity and individualization (Ball *et al.*, 2000). Old-fashioned class differences were less visible in a youth landscape where the London informants produced narratives for a 'contingently reflexive life-time biographical project' that deals with new risks and opportunities (Giddens, 1991, quoted in Ball *et al.*, 2000: 2).

Our cohorts, born in 1993/4 (18-year-olds at Felix Holt) and 1995/6 (16-year-olds at South Park), were equally inclined to accept responsibility for their own futures and to embark on reflexive biographies. Young people described themselves as individual agents, responsible for their school results, career paths and even life courses, and seemed to accept the individualizing, sorting and labelling processes of school as entirely fair and natural, with available opportunities related directly to ability and effort. Our respondents' narratives contain, nevertheless, stories and insights that reach beyond individualism and suggest the extent to which students know the importance



and influence of their families, including the parts played by previous generations.

### *South Park*

Every one of the group A students at South Park embarked on the 'high academic' track named a range of academic, scientific and technical interests and aspirations that were closely related to their parents' backgrounds. Rose, for example, whose researcher father held a chemistry PhD, aimed to study natural sciences at Cambridge before progressing to a PhD herself: 'I want to do something to do with academia; knowledge and learning is what I've always loved. Especially in scientific research.' Zoey, whose parents were both scientists, identified marine biology or high-energy physics as potential areas of doctoral study. Sean, whose parents were both professors, wanted to work in science, though he didn't have a particular course in mind: 'I'd like to study at a high level, in a lot of detail'.

Elijah (father a professor, mother a leading researcher) was considering economics, international relations or aeronautical engineering as career paths, but emphasized his desire for a high-level technical, professional job, with the potential to 'spin off into high-tech manufacturing'. Isabella (both parents scientists) hoped for a career in sports medicine. Owen (grandfather an actuary, both parents scientists) aspired to study science and mathematics. Chloe (academic parents) was keen to study medicine and said that her friends and family had helped her understanding of medicine and medical careers. Some of her friends' parents were doctors or surgeons and 'from what they've said it sounds really interesting'.

Family connections and influences were equally important for B group members, especially in accessing local opportunities. Sandy already worked Saturdays at her mother's hairdressing salon and described plans for improving the business when she qualified. Patrick was expecting C grades but liked doing hands-on work and had no desire to sit in an office. His parents wanted him to be a plumber and regarded it as a 'good trade'. He saw plumbing as an attractive career option. Gavin was keen to follow his father into the police force. He was completing a diploma in public services (for bus drivers, librarians, police officers etc.) and said his father was trying to find him a suitable training opportunity for when he left school. Jordan's father used to play football and would 'kick a ball around with me, he'd show me how to improve'. Jordan himself had won a scholarship to an FE college and intended to take a level 3 sport and leisure course, with a view to becoming a professional footballer. Isaac grew up in a household with animals and wanted to study animal management before working in a pet

shop, an ambition supported without question by his father (a decorator) and mother (a cleaner).

A mathematics teacher reported a sense amongst his departmental colleagues that some students were content to reach the minimum level at Key Stage 3 (KS3) and lacked 'the desire to push on', despite the school's 'purposeful attempt to raise aspiration'. He spoke of an 'unofficial view' that there is a split between children from academic backgrounds and others 'who live in the village who are not going to perform as well'. People from the immediate locality seemed content with their lives and were generally less ambitious. The maths teacher worried that children from such backgrounds would lack role models and so have little idea how to progress beyond familiar environments.

This did not apply to Nathan, whose career horizons seemed very different from other B group members, with their willing acceptance of less-prestigious vocational options. His ambition to become a film director seemed unrealistic in view of his predicted C/D grades but he was encouraged nevertheless by his advantaged family. He planned to take the media national certificate and study film studies at the less-selective sixth form college, to be followed by the London Film School or the New York Film Academy:

I think my parents will fund it, they want me to get the best of life; some of my friends think film director is too big; I say I know what I'm doing and can do it. Ever since I was little my dad's been showing me films, creative ideas, *Lord of the Rings*, so I thought I'd like to express my ideas on the big screen, used to write stories and cartoons.

Nathan was determined not to settle for the limited options pursued by many less academically successful students. His outlook contrasts sharply with others of apparently similar ability and suggests that, although young people exercise agency, their aspirations are inflected by the social contexts in which they live and by their sense of what is normal for people 'like me' (Archer *et al.*, 2010). The concept of economic, cultural and social capital, transmitted through the family and community, helps make sense of the dissimilarity between the A and B groups at South Park, especially in their attitudes towards available academic and career paths (Bourdieu, 1986).

### Felix Holt

As we turn our attention to the 18-year-olds at Felix Holt and examine the roles of the students' families in shaping vocational aspirations and decisions, we can supplement our interview data with an additional, longitudinal

source of information, the family employment history details supplied by each respondent (Appendix 2). Despite the limitations of the data, this source increases our knowledge of family patterns and influences, enabling us to consider our sample's goals in the context of jobs chosen by their parents and grandparents.

The Family Employment History (Appendix 2) details three generations, including grandparents born mainly in the 1940s and 1950s, parents born mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, and the respondents themselves, born c. 1993/94. Overall, the table captures a great variety and complexity of experience, with families and individuals drawing on diverse resources and subject to fluctuating fortunes, often related to the local and national economy. Families have adapted in different ways to the economic and educational opportunities that have unfolded through the last fifty years. Upward trajectories can be found, though progress is rarely simple or linear, with many apparently successful individuals subsequently losing ground through divorce, illness, recession and unemployment. Two significant trends are evident from close scrutiny of the Family Employment History and the students' interviews:

- Over time, family members often work in similar or analogous occupations.
- Parents are a strong influence on occupational choice and status aspiration.

#### RELATED OCCUPATIONS

Over 60 per cent of students reported two or more relatives in similar or related jobs. Lance's father and grandfather were telecommunication engineers, for example; both Jack's parents were accountants, while three of his grandparents were involved in motor transport. Lucy's mother and paternal grandfather were both telephone company managers. Rachael's father and three of her grandparents were involved in carpentry or gardening. Rebecca's family included three teachers. Andrew, Colin, Gemma, Kylie, Lance, Michael and Nick all had multiple family members involved in engineering, electronics and electrical work. Charlotte's father and grandfather were trade managers, while her mother was one of three teaching assistants in the cohort whose children planned to become teachers. Mary's grandmothers both worked in private business while her father ran his own computer repair company, and her mother was an accountant for her husband.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Over 30 per cent of respondents reported a strong vocational link between their parents, other family members, and their own academic and career preferences at this stage. Paul's mother was a teaching assistant; Paul wished to teach. Tony had extensive work experience with his father's accountancy firm and was committed to a career in accountancy. Dave was keen to follow his father into the police force. Harry had decided to join Tesco, a chain supermarket, where his mother worked.

The interviews confirm that many students develop a vocational disposition related closely to family interests, hobbies and occupations (see also chapter 4). Several A group members referred to close relatives as the inspiration for their career preferences. Lance, for example, spent a lot of time at his grandfather's house when he was young, and remembered that 'he was always doing electronic stuff and that has led to where I am now'. His parents had encouraged his interest, and had made sure that he participated in relevant extracurricular activities, trips and work experience. At the time of his interview, Lance had decided to become a chartered engineer and recognized that his grandfather (an electrician with British Telecom) and parents had helped develop the groundwork for his career.

Michael also reported that he had picked up a lot of knowledge and understanding from family members involved in engineering. Rebecca, whose grandmother was a nurse, felt that her mother had been overbearing in her 'desperation for me to become a doctor' but she nevertheless valued her family's encouragement to pursue a medical career, and their practical help with work experience. These manoeuvres illustrate the sophisticated ways in which family resources may be deployed to maintain status and class advantage, with successful parents offering informal guidance and access that smooths the path towards highly-regarded universities and occupations (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

Less academic students (grade C or lower) were also aware of the need to mobilize available family resources to secure a toehold in the job market. Tony had already worked for his father and was prepared to sacrifice his independence for the time being. Dave was also realistic and recognized that it would be difficult to follow his father into the police: 'You can work as hard as you like but if they are not recruiting, they are not recruiting'. He was rather sorry that his father's contacts and service no longer guarantee entry. Dave said he was reconciled to becoming a special constable and joining the waiting list.

A business studies teacher said that many students were reluctant to look beyond the local area and were inhibited by a lack of self-belief and self-

esteem. She reported that when she wore her 'careers teacher hat' and asked about the future or their aspirations, 'they don't think they should dream big, and that's what holds them back from going beyond parents and what they could achieve themselves'. She said that some students chose to stay on in the sixth form 'not because it is the best place but because they don't want to venture out, don't want to try something else'. She wished she could inject them with 'the swagger, the confidence' of the privately educated students she encountered through extracurricular activities. She said that boys from one school in particular 'know where they are going; it's built into their world from day one, they know the university, the course and what they are going to do'. An economics teacher agreed that students somehow embodied their family background: 'The older they get, the more you can distinguish those from a money background, especially from an affluent area, from the way they hold themselves, the clothes they wear, the way they speak'.

One of the pastoral leaders, a teacher of business studies and economics, disagreed that students were held back by lack of confidence, claiming that 'the students who come my way in year 11 and year 13 are very ambitious'. Simon is an example of a B group student who expected to rise in the world despite weaker predicted grades. He outlined how he would enter the media and work his way up through family contacts. One relative owned a media production company and had contacts at the BBC; his father's partner was a TV director who had worked with celebrities on cooking shows. His family experience indicated to him that you don't necessarily need a degree and can climb your way up from lowly positions. He said he 'can get a job through contacts' because people liked his positive attitude and found him a likeable lad.

Simon, like Nathan at South Park, had been strongly influenced by his successful family to 'dream big' and to look beyond the usual pathways open to someone with his predicted grades. Despite relatively poorer academic results, both boys possessed an element of the 'swagger, the confidence' observed in private schoolboys by the Felix Holt careers teacher. The contrast between these two and other B group students confirms that socio-economic status is a significant influence on occupational goals, and that young people's aspirations are shaped by their identities, embodied practices and structural locations (Rojewski and Kim, 2003; Archer *et al.*, 2010).

Young people at both schools explained how their identities, values, aspirations, dispositions and interests had drawn, and continue to draw, upon varied sources of capital (see chapter 4). Regardless of background and ability, every student's account was permeated by an awareness that the family, past and present, continued to be significant in their lives. This is

consistent with Ball *et al.*'s (2000) finding that families were more significant in their respondents' social and educational experiences than expected, with parents in particular playing an important role in career and life planning. A markedly similar pattern emerges from Vincent's (1997) study of 444 respondents interviewed between 1969 and 1973. Parents, older siblings or nearby kin were instrumental in arranging three out of every four posts obtained by this twentieth-century cohort. It seems that families are not as easily overcome as individualism suggests.

### Realism and risk

This evidence confirms that family background and educational tracking have an interrelated, reciprocal influence on respondents' thoughts about the future, and work to condition respondents' views of available opportunities. Respondents' 'horizons for action' are constrained, therefore, by a realistic assessment of what is available and by their evolving ideas of what is suitable for applicants like themselves. As a result, social variables (class, ethnicity, gender) have a continued structuring effect that leads to unequal life chances, apparently similar to those experienced in the 1990s by members of a study cohort on a government training scheme (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). This does not mean that the students' agency in their own lives should be discounted or that impersonal forces predetermine their careers. On the contrary, respondents provided numerous examples of intelligent planning and action.

### South Park

This was true at South Park, although students were primarily concerned with choosing a sixth form college course to match their interests and ability. Respondents explained the options they were considering and expressed clear vocational ideas, but these were seldom specific; they indicated a direction of travel rather than a particular job or role. As we have seen, Elijah spoke of 'career options' in economics, international relations and aeronautical engineering and was aware that you could become an engineer, 'then spin off into a high-tech manufacturing company'. Rose was already committed to the idea of a PhD and scientific research, but her vocational dreams included space travel and Arctic exploration.

Group A students in general seemed convergent in their pursuit of the 'high academic' track. They were inclined to connect a favourite school subject (science, history) with an obvious occupation (e.g. researcher, teacher). Respondents seemed driven by their enjoyment of particular subjects and by the influence of one or more family members and teachers. Owen, for example, said mathematics and science were for him: 'I do try in those

subjects because I enjoy them, and that's why I've done well. I want to go to degree level, and in terms of jobs and careers, see myself doing science/math's.

Sophie too was certain about her favourite subject and envisaged a future career based on it:

I'd quite like to go into teaching because I'm passionate about history and would like to share. I read lots of history and watch lots of programmes, and try to further my knowledge. I just generally find it interesting, the past is a fascinating place, not that it may help me in the future, and I just love it.

Although most A group students had clear preferences, they were aware that their vocational plans were at an early stage and expected that their GCSE results and sixth form courses would provide the additional information they needed to find a route through higher education towards a professional career. Isabella, for example, said nothing was 'set in stone' and that she needed more time to 'see how I do in A levels' and 'find what I really like'. She was 'thinking about doing a degree that opens more doors into higher-rated jobs'.

B group students, who were expecting less good GCSE results, were often less certain about the possibilities ahead, or expressed doubts about goals the A group were inclined to take for granted. Leah, for example, was planning to study sociology, English literature, photography and mathematics at the less-selective sixth form college, but was 'not sure what I want to do after that. I've chosen a range where I could get into any job.' With her family background (sick brother, non-working parents) she also had serious reservations about university on financial grounds, pointing out that the fees 'may pre-empt resources you want for something else'. Max was considering working abroad, doing charitable work or 'building something' and was applying for an eclectic range of sixth form subjects, including psychology, philosophy, film studies, art and design. These subjects were 'all things I love doing, they're all creative'.

Alison was coping with the competing demands of school, part-time work, and social life, and with her parents' recent divorce. Despite the upsetting family break-up, she was anxious to 'get on with it' and get the grade B needed for admission to her chosen course in sport and psychology. Uncertain about her prospects, she was realistic but proactive in juggling the different aspects of her life:

I'm predicted a D in Spanish, on average Bs and Cs, and an A in Physics ... I've already had part-time jobs, I'd hope to continue

with work on the side of my education, I haven't got settled plans ... having a job limits your social life. I have work Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. I'll do my homework when I get home ... I'm getting time off work towards my exams, they're very understanding of my school life.

Young people, especially those expected to achieve average and below-average grades, have to juggle complex demands on their time and energy, and often make pragmatic decisions about part-time jobs, social life and homework on the basis of little information. Although these decisions may have long-term consequences, the outcomes are far from inevitable.

### Felix Holt

Students at Felix Holt, two years further on with their school careers, displayed a more developed understanding of relevant education and employment opportunities, and often entered into sophisticated calculations about the future. Tom and Charlotte (A group students), for example, showed strategic awareness and realism in developing their plans, but the main obstacle for both of them seemed to be a simplistic tracking system that did not match their needs. Tom was unsure what he wanted to do and was reluctant to follow the logic of the academic route on which he appeared to be progressing well. Although he was good at English, he was not convinced that he would derive much enjoyment from a full degree course. He said he found it 'hard to commit to things' and feared that if he jumped into university he would come to regret it within a couple of years. He argued that universities no longer guaranteed a job and that he might have a 'head start' if he entered employment 'three years sooner than other people'. Tom's reservations (like Leah's at South Park) illustrate the ways in which some young people now worry about the value of higher education and seriously consider the advantages of alternative courses of action.

Charlotte was also frustrated by the implications of the tracking system. She was anxious to reconcile her proven ability (A grades were predicted) with her passionate interest in theatre and drama. She had been involved in shows from a young age and thought that it 'would be brilliant to act' but had become aware that drama was deemed a vocational and possibly less prestigious subject. She had gained the impression that 'drama is not a subject to go with if you want to succeed in life', remarking that:

I wasn't offered A-level drama, only BTEC. I wish I'd been offered A-level so I could study Shakespeare, look at scripts more, look at things in depth. BTEC is not worthless but I feel that if I'd had the



chance to do A-level it would have helped me with options. Some universities don't like BTEC.

Charlotte was determined to be a drama teacher, nevertheless, and planned to do work experience with a theatre company before going to drama school.

Some students were busy making their own luck by building on work experience and part-time jobs. Dean was recommended to Sky Media by a teacher at Felix Holt who had once worked for the company; Dean enjoyed a week's placement that was 'spot on for my interests in telesales and advertising'. Gemma's work placements, including a part-time job with an animal lecturing company, gave her valuable experience that refined her vocational interest, so that she was thinking of wild animal medicine rather than her original plan to care for companion animals. Tony's plans had developed through 'doing stuff for my Dad at Canary Wharf' and with other companies 'my Dad's got me into'.

Poised before major public examinations, however, many borderline students were concerned about the risks they faced. Passionate about dreamed careers, they were close to the point when they might have to adjust their sights downwards or even change direction entirely. Tania, aware that she was a good talker and would do better with oral exams, had begun to face the reality of below-par predicted grades. She talked about re-sits and biology-based alternatives if she did not achieve the results demanded by veterinary college. Marilyn's predicted grades were also lower than required for her first choice place. She felt that her examination skills 'aren't up to standard; I struggle with essay writing' but still hoped that in the end she would do better than expected and so gain admission to a post-1992 law school.

Layla had decided against university because her predicted grades were 'pulling me down, so I'd rather not go there'. She had chosen instead to pursue a career as a trader, much influenced by an economics teacher who had worked on the stock market. Joyce was determined to work with horses 'at all costs' but had discovered she hated further mathematics and chemistry. She had given up hope of veterinary medicine and talked about equine studies, a subject geared toward people working with horses rather than in the laboratory. The cold reality of the results to come was impinging on these students and obliging them to contemplate reduced 'horizons for action'.

The strategies and plans that these accounts show our respondents developing should not be interpreted as the inevitable outcomes of underlying structures and processes. The students always emphasized a strong sense of personal responsibility for their decisions and goals. They saw themselves as active agents, negotiating individual pathways through the transition from

school to work, and into the early years of employment. Social interactions (with parents, education/training providers and the workplace) were closely interrelated with their pragmatic decisions. As they mused on academic and career possibilities, most students were aware that apparently small decisions could have long-term consequences, and acknowledged that with time their aspirations and career trajectories might be subject to change.

A good many young people had witnessed threatening changes in family circumstances and could envisage having to cope with similar life-changing events. Even when their choices appeared predictable and straightforward, respondents saw themselves as pragmatic agents, searching for the best pathway and the most suitable opportunity. Young people's perceptions of future courses and careers may be deeply rooted in their identities, life histories and individual experience, but our data suggests their decisions, like those in Hodkinson *et al.*'s study (1996), are neither determined nor unfettered, are subject to constant revision and adjustment, and have the potential to produce uncertain, unpredictable trajectories and outcomes.

### Upward mobility

The Felix Holt Family Employment History (Appendix 2) provides an unusual glimpse of 42 young people as they launch themselves into the world, and suggests the extent to which they have the potential to climb above their parents. Almost all have identified pathways suitable for their aptitudes, interests and expected results. Some, especially in the B group, cling to aspirations that may later be revised downwards in the light of actual results. But it is too soon to judge their ultimate occupational success or to assess their qualities as striving members of professional, commercial and voluntary organizations. These students have well-defined goals, however, that indicate the nature and status of their likely early employment. Does this information support the government's assertion that educational qualifications are the key to mobility?

Table 6.4 details the occupational backgrounds and aspirations of the most academically successful students at Felix Holt, all expected to achieve straight A grades in their final examinations. These are exceptional students with great potential. Colin, for example, aims to be an electronic engineer. Adele intends to become a lawyer, Gemma hopes to be a veterinary surgeon, and Graham has his sights on becoming a software developer. None of these careers guarantees top earnings and some named destinations have the potential to be much better paid than others, but the intended routes all have scope for progression. Much depends on an individual finding and exploiting opportunities in the future. As Martin suggested, life can be like

mah-jong<sup>5</sup> 'where you can go along without success, then suddenly a couple of opportunities and you win the game'.

**Table 6.4:** Felix Holt high achievers: occupational background and intentions

Student	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Career intention
Adele	Accountant	Carer	Lawyer
Andrew	Carpenter	Illustrator/artist	Wildlife photographer
Ben	Car sales/driver	Nurse	Teacher
Charlotte	Trade manager	Teaching assistant	Drama teacher
Colin	Clothes company	Confectionery industry	Electronic engineer
Gemma	Computer engineer	Support worker	Veterinary surgeon
Graham	Insurance management	School admissions	Software developer
Jack	Accountant	Accountant	Chemist/researcher
Kylie	Drainage engineer	Communications manager	Teacher
Lance	Telecommunications	Teaching assistant	Electronic engineer
Lucy	Printer/unemployed	BT manager	English degree
Martin	Chef/restaurateur	Hairdresser	English degree
Michael	Wholesale delivery	Shop work	Electrical engineer
Paul	TV sports producer	Teaching assistant	Teacher
Rachael	Carpenter	Investment banker	Work abroad/ languages
Rebecca	Managing director	Teacher	Cancer research
Rob	IT/redundant	Teacher	Research chemist
Tom	Manual work	Customer service	Undecided

There are significant difficulties, however, with using this data to assess prospective social mobility. The lack of detailed information and the reliance on self-reported, non-standardized job descriptors (e.g. 'wholesale delivery') provide an unreliable, invalid foundation for measuring the potential earnings disparity between the fathers listed and their offspring, male or female. Our qualitative interviews cannot illuminate or resolve the statistical controversies that arise from recent attempts to arrive at firm conclusions about male social

mobility through the rigorous analysis and counter-analysis of birth cohort data (Blanden *et al.*, 2005a; Gorard, 2008).

The Family Employment History, however incomplete and anecdotal, suggests nevertheless the inadequacy of a conception of improvement and mobility that is limited to tracking individual males. Respondents' interviews and job histories exemplify at a local level the extent and significance of marked changes in female occupational status over the last fifty years. The 'high academic' pathways selected by the group A girls at South Park also illustrate the rapid growth of female participation in education and higher-level employment in recent years. This remarkable change in the sources of family position and prosperity prompts a new and contrasting understanding of intra- and intergenerational mobility. It demands a very different investigative approach, one concerned more with households and family networks than with isolated pairs of fathers and sons. Women can no longer be excluded from calculations of individual and family mobility: the Family Employment History helps us understand why this is so.

The occupations listed for grandmothers, mothers and their daughters are consistent with national trends. They reflect both the increasing numbers of women participating in education since the 1960s and a parallel improvement in female access to well-regarded academic and career pathways. There were 118,000 students at university in 1962/3 (Robbins Report, 1963) and 1,367,330 reading for first degrees in 2011, with women occupying over half of the latter undergraduate places (Broecke and Hamed, 2008; HESA, 2011).

Few grandmothers of the 1940s/50s generation seem to have acquired academic qualifications or to have followed well-defined careers in the modern sense (Appendix 2) (Dyhouse, 1995). The majority of occupations recorded are routine clerical or manual jobs, with the occasional nurse or teacher standing out as exceptional in a world of female employment comprised of cleaners, gardeners, shop assistants, factory workers, carers, hairdressers, receptionists and office staff (Deem, 1981).

By contrast, women in the next generation (our respondents' mothers) seem to have benefited from improved access to sixth forms and further and higher education, and to have progressed into more demanding roles. The survey documents two accountants, two managers in telecommunications, an investment banker, a banker, an engineer, and a number of non-routine administrators (e.g. a payroll manager and an admissions secretary). Nurses and teachers have become more numerous than in the previous generation, while there are few references to factory and manual work, and none to gardening and agriculture. Schools have become significant employers of women, with 26 per cent of the mothers employed as teachers, teaching

assistants and education-sector office workers. No student listed his or her mother as a housewife. Sometimes the mothers have better jobs than their husbands. Andrew, Ben, Lucy, Rachael, Rob and Tom all have mothers with greater occupational status than their husbands. Women may also become the main breadwinner following redundancy, ill health, separation and divorce (Appendix 2).

A comparison between the mothers' stated occupations and their daughters' intentions suggests there is considerable potential for a further advance in the qualifications and work roles of women. Table 6.5 shows the maternal side (grandmother, mother, daughter) of 13 Felix Holt families, selected because the female respondents seem to have the greatest chances of social mobility. These daughters are poised to outperform their mothers and grandmothers in terms of professional status and income. They have seized opportunities less readily available in the previous generation, and are aiming for employment as teachers, lawyers, veterinary surgeons, cancer researchers and journalists, rather than following their mothers as teaching assistants and office workers. This is much less the case for the 'high academic' track daughters at South Park, where successful young women appear to be emulating their highly educated mothers. There is a marked, unusual concentration of female professionals amongst South Park parents, possibly associated with the nearby university and science park.

**Table 6.5: Felix Holt: women's careers**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Grandmother's occupation</b>	<b>Mother's occupation</b>	<b>Career intention</b>	<b>Father's occupation</b>
Adele	Caterer/cleaner	Carer	Lawyer	Accountant
Charlotte	Cleaner	Teaching assistant	Drama teacher	Trade manager
Gemma	Not known	Support worker	Veterinary surgeon	Computer engineer
Rebecca	Nurse	Teacher	Cancer research	Managing director
Claudia	Self-employed	Admin worker	Primary teacher	Police officer
Lauren	Not known	Payroll manager	Chemist	Police officer
Layla	Housewife	Teacher	Trader	Business transport

Louise	Shop assistant	Teaching assistant	Artist	Not known – 'drew a lot'
Marilyn	Teacher	School office	Lawyer	Managing director
Mia	Not known	Exam invigilator	Journalist/historian	Software developer
Paula	Cashier	Teaching assistant	Teacher	Carpenter
Tania	Not known	Doctor's receptionist	Veterinary surgeon	Boat builder
Zara	Not known	Clergy	Lawyer/own business	Builder

The young women featured in Table 6.5 confirm the proposition that success, however defined, derives from the long-term accumulation of advantages that enables fortunate individuals to benefit from changes in social and economic circumstances (Gladwell, 2008). Although some of the mothers shown occupy relatively modest positions in the labour market, the fathers are generally successful, skilled individuals, often with private business interests or professional qualifications. Adele's desire to be a lawyer may signify a potential leap forward from her mother's work as a carer, but is less remarkable in the context of her father's profession as an accountant. A similar possible jump for Tania, from her mother's duties as a doctor's receptionist to her own hopes of becoming a veterinary surgeon, seems more predictable when her father's boat-building business and her previous private education are taken into account. These daughters come from skilled, advantaged families, so they are well positioned to exploit the expansion of higher education and changes in the nature of available employment.

This undoubted generational progress in the status and quality of work available for women changes our perspective on social mobility and upsets traditional assumptions about the male-centred nature of female status and mobility (Acker, 1973). We can no longer concentrate on individual male earnings, because women's income and position is equally important. Partnerships, successful and less successful, sustained and less sustained, have become a vital influence on life chances and trajectories, and have long-term significance for family members, both adults and children. Women's and men's social and economic prospects are today closely associated with the nature and quality of the relationships formed by their mothers and fathers, and also with the prosperity of their own partnerships (Coats, 1994).

This is confirmed by the A group respondents shown in Table 6.4 (p. 126). These high-achieving students, male and female, with the partial exceptions of Lucy and Rob, come from prosperous double-income households, with one or both parents occupying senior, well-rewarded positions or running their own businesses. The 24 A group students at South Park, whose expected examination results are equally promising, are in a similar position. For bright students at both schools, there is considerable potential for above-average earnings and social mobility.

This potential need not translate into upward mobility, however, especially in the economic climate following the banking crisis of 2007–2008. Greater competition between well-qualified candidates for a reduced number of high-quality jobs, increased tuition fees, and daunting house prices are amongst many reasons why young people from successful double-income families may struggle to do better than parents blessed by relatively benign economic conditions in the past. Participation in sixth form and higher education has grown so that advantaged students now have to secure admission to prestigious universities simply to maintain their family's position, never mind to advance further.

### **Fluidity and stability**

Our data shows the myriad ways in which good schools and families help students succeed and so contribute to social fluidity, with capable young people acquiring qualifications that were not available for many in the previous generation, and so adapting to changes in the structure of the labour market. The large number of students progressing through South Park to the highly selective local sixth form college, and growing Russell Group participation at Felix Holt, prove that excellent comprehensives can compete at the highest level, with their best students moving on to distinguished careers and some winning Oxbridge places. Our respondents exercised considerable agency in negotiating academic and career transitions, and their trajectories varied greatly as a result, with individuals seeking opportunities and making the most of their advantages, howsoever defined and accumulated (Gladwell, 2008). Students understood the pathways through GCSE and beyond, although their choices were shaped by their underlying dispositions and by a pragmatic assessment of whether an option is suitable.

As we have seen, however, there are marked differences between the A and B groups at both schools that relate to the students' social and cultural capital, curriculum tracking and their examination results. Members of the B group, with a few notable exceptions, have poorer examination prospects and have adjusted their 'horizons of action' downwards to expect relatively low

status and income. Social class seems to operate through depressed academic attainment that feeds back into students' self-perceptions and lowers their aspirations (Furlong and Biggart, 1999). Our data provides a poignant example of this process, with Rose looking forward to a Cambridge PhD followed by space travel or Arctic exploration, and Isaac declaring himself content with the prospect of working in a pet shop.

Even in these two outstanding schools, examinations and tracking seem to measure, reward and pigeonhole particular types of ability, rather than to facilitate strategies that encourage everyone to succeed. Social context, inherited attitudes and assumptions, curriculum tracking and examination results tend to discourage 'unrealistic' aspirations and eventually guide most B group students towards lower-status vocational destinations. The family, rather than the individual, seems to be the key unit in the process of stratification and acts to perpetuate and crystallize inequality. Family patterns and influences were demonstrably significant for our students' life and career planning, while educational provision seems to have reinforced rather than transformed the processes of social reproduction, so contributing to social stability (Archer *et al.*, 2010).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Standardised Assessment Tasks (SATs).
- <sup>2</sup> Rutter *et al.* (1979) estimate 15,000 hours as the time children spend at school.
- <sup>3</sup> At the point of interview, many students had module results to hand.
- <sup>4</sup> Vocational+ hopes to achieve C grades for entry to a vocational course in higher education, sometimes at the second attempt.
- <sup>5</sup> A Chinese game for four people, played with tiles.