

Can Coalition Education Reforms Overcome Family Background and Improve Social Mobility?

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Draft paper pending submission to a journal; not for citation/reference without the authors' permission, contact: rekrab3@gmail.com.

New Labour and Coalition governments have made social mobility an important policy theme, and have urged schools to improve student progress, to close the attainment gap for the less advantaged, and so to increase access to top universities and jobs. This paper investigates whether Coalition reforms since 2010 can achieve their specified goals. 88 students aged 15 – 18 were interviewed at two suburban case study academies to discover their perceptions of the influence of family on their growth, development and choice of education and employment pathways. In a 'best case' scenario, where prototype academies have rigorously implemented government policy, are students less reliant than before on family resources, influences and dispositions? The interviews suggest that family is not an independent variable to be overcome but the source of a mix of dispositions that are imprinted through childhood and shape everyone's growth and learning. Families emerged as a decisive influence on students' attitudes, values, occupational interests and preferences, while school structures, including academic and vocational tracking, constrained choices and lowered horizons. There is little sign that our case study schools have overcome family background or have reduced the effects of relative poverty. Social mobility policy should be urgently reviewed.

Key words: education and social mobility, inequality, disadvantage, school reform, academies, family background.

Introduction

The Coalition government is committed to radical education reforms designed to overcome family influences on aspirations and achievement, and so to increase opportunity and social mobility, specifically by closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged students (Department for Education [DfE], 2010; Her Majesty's Government [HMG], 2011). The aim is to free young people from 'the circumstances of their birth; the home they're born into ... or the jobs their parents do' (Nick Clegg in HMG, 2011: 3). This clear policy depends, however, on the assumption that effective schools are the main influence on examination results, able to enhance student performance regardless of relative prosperity or disadvantage.

The problem is that serious doubts have been raised about school effectiveness research (Gorard, 2010) and in any case ‘schools only rarely overcome the relative differences between the performance of different social groups’ (Mortimore and Whitty, 2000: 22). There is a persistent correlation between standardized GCSE point scores and relative wealth at *all schools*, with achievement levels invariably dispersed across the spectrum of inequality, rather than sharply polarised between disadvantaged students and everyone else (Cook, 2012¹). The type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lives seems a more reliable predictor of his or her GCSE performance than any other information held about that student on the Pupil Level Annual School Census database (Webber and Butler, 2005). There is considerable uncertainty, therefore, about the degree to which the achieving self can be liberated from conditions that have contributed to the formation of identity, values and expectations (Reay, 2006).

In light of these concerns, this paper aims to investigate whether the Coalition’s education reforms are likely to overcome disadvantage and increase social mobility. We present evidence drawn from 88 interviews with students in two suburban academies, and assess the respondents’ perceptions of the role of their families in their growth and development, as well as their choice of educational and employment pathways. In a ‘best case’ scenario, where highly rated, pioneering academies have rigorously implemented practices strongly recommended by the DfE (2010) and Ofsted (2013), are students less reliant than before on family resources, influences and dispositions? Can highly effective academies remove long-standing barriers, overcome disadvantage and increase upward social mobility?

Education and Social Mobility

Policy Aims

Social mobility has become a major policy theme, pursued by New Labour and Coalition governments for over a decade, especially following widespread acceptance of the finding that social mobility is ‘low and falling’, with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds said to be less likely to achieve upward mobility than in a

¹ Reproduced in Hoskins and Barker, 2014 (figure 2.1)

previous generation (Blanden et al., 2005a, 2005b; Sutton Trust, 2009). There are marked ‘similarities and continuities’ between the formation of policies for increasing social mobility under Labour and Coalition governments (Riddell, 2013: 849). Numerous official documents² have argued that upward mobility has stalled, with urgent action needed to ensure fair access to a good education and better jobs. Ministers have become determined to ‘open doors’ and ‘unleash potential’. New Labour ministers promised action to improve education and increase opportunity (Wintour, 2004; Kelly, quoted in Gorard, 2008: 318), while Michael Gove, Education Secretary since 2010, claims his ‘moral purpose in Government is to break the lock which prevents children from our poorest families making it into our best universities and walking into the best jobs’ (Gove, 2011, unpagged).

Coalition reforms aim to ensure that schools improve student progress, close the attainment gap for those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and increase upward mobility. The academies programme is expanding rapidly, with schools accountable for their own improvement (DfE, 2010). The Pupil Premium provides an extra £2.5 billion (2014/15) to support disadvantaged students while schools are required to show their use of the funds and the impact of their interventions (HMG, 2011; DfE, 2014). Teacher training is to be reformed (DfE, 2010).

Reforms of the curriculum and examination system aim to establish a ‘tighter, more rigorous, model of knowledge which every child should expect to master in core subjects at every key stage’ (DfE, 2010: 10). The draft National Curriculum is designed to embody academic values and traditional approaches, including priority for functional skills over creative writing in English and detailed factual knowledge in other subjects (DfE, 2013).

Examinations are to become much tougher, with the introduction of ‘English Baccalaureate’ criteria and a new scoring method to reward schools and students achieving good grades in selected academic subjects. A new ‘floor standard’ for primary and secondary schools sets an escalating minimum expectation for

² Labour strategy documents include Cabinet Office, 2008, Panel on Fair Access to the Professions [PFAP], 2009 and HM Government, 2010; Coalition policy proposals have been formulated in Department for Education, 2010 and HM Government, 2011.

attainment, while two new measures (a) check the progress of deprived pupils, and (b) indicate ‘how young people do when they leave school’ (DfE, 2010: 13). GCSE qualifications are being reformed to ensure they are more academic and demanding (Barker, 2013). Mr Gove’s distinguishing claim is that a curriculum based on traditional academic subjects and more difficult examinations will improve social mobility for everyone.

Social Mobility Trends

This strong policy imperative has insecure foundations. Repeated analysis of large-scale national birth cohorts³ has produced a puzzling portrait of intergenerational variation in occupations and incomes during the post-war period. Eleven studies have shown increasing social mobility; thirteen studies have found stability, and four have identified declining mobility (Lambert et al., 2007). Some experts have found little or no change in total mobility rates despite improved educational and career opportunities (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008), while others have reported a trend of slowly increasing mobility for men and women (Lambert et al., 2007).

One influential study, often cited by politicians to justify their intervention, claims that intergenerational mobility declined in Britain between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, and remains low by international standards (Blanden et al., 2002; Blanden et al., 2005a). This research has been challenged, however, with one critical review discovering that in both cohorts around 17 percent of those born to the poorest 25 percent of families end up in the richest quadrant. Taken at face value, this could mean that ‘Britain has a quite staggering level of social mobility’ (Gorard, 2008: 323), an inference at sharp variance with the original proposition that mobility is ‘low and falling’ (Blanden et al., 2005b). The Coalition has embarked on education reforms to increase mobility without first establishing a realistic picture of key trends, and without acknowledging a variety of other influences on social fluidity.

School Effectiveness

³ Four major studies have provided much of the data used in social mobility analysis: National Child Development Study (NCDS), from 1958; British Cohort Study (BCS), from 1970; British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), from 1991; Millenium Cohort Study (MCS), from 2000.

There are similar problems with the government's reliance on often repeated but frequently challenged claims that effective schools are 'an important means of implementing policies intended to combat social disadvantage' (Sammons and Bakkum, 2011: 9). There is, for example, a 'strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement' (Mortimore and Whitty, 2000: 10). Across the system, socioeconomic status remains 'the most powerful predictor of student success' (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000: 422) and 'in assessing relative performance' it is important to understand the contribution of student background (Gorard and Taylor, 2001: 367).

The correlation between poverty and disappointing school performance is confirmed by national datasets (Cook, 2012; Webber and Butler, 2005) while the relatively poor performance of children in receipt of free school meals has not improved since 2007/8, despite great efforts to 'close the gap' (Deputy Prime Minister's Office [DPMO], unpagued, 2011). Reay believes the 'attainment gap between the classes in education is just as great as it was 20, 50 years ago' (2006: 304). This link between relative wealth and educational outcomes is confirmed by the recent finding that the gradient of income inequality in a country, as measured by the Gini coefficient⁴, can be used to estimate accurately the incidence of health and other problems. International educational scores are closely related to income inequality and 'more unequal states have worse educational attainment' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 105).

Economic, cultural and social inequality, rather than a particular level of social deprivation, seems to be the major influence on school performance. As Crawford et al. (2011) conclude in a review for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, it is very hard to increase social mobility without tackling the various forms of inequality. There are grounds to doubt whether micro-level interventions of the kind encouraged by the Pupil Premium⁵ can have a significant impact on the very large achievement differences between successful, better off students and those who are eligible for FSM.

⁴ The Gini coefficient is a widely used measure of inequality across a whole society (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 17/18).

⁵ See above, p. 2.

Alternative Perspectives

Michael Gove has an individualist stance, however, and believes we can all become ‘authors of our own life stories’ when we are freed from the constraints that bind us (DfE, 2010: 6), and like Samuel Smiles, the great prophet of Victorian self-help, envisages hardworking individuals improving themselves through their own ‘free and independent action’, regardless of their background (Smiles, 1860: 2). Since the late 1980s, governments have been strongly influenced by the alleged demise of class politics, the erosion of older collective identities, and by the rise and spread of a culture of individualism and the economics of individualization (Ball et al., 2000). Ministers insist that ‘people are individuals’ (Reay, 2012: 588) and that ‘poverty is no excuse for failure’ (Alexiadou, 2002: 75).

In this context, policy-makers have been drawn to effectiveness studies that emphasize the role of individual schools in raising achievement (e.g. Rutter et al., 1979) and have encouraged the intense focus on differential examination performance stimulated by the publication of annual league tables from 1992 (Reed and Hallgarten, 2003). They tend to blame schools rather than background influences such as social class and disadvantage for attainment differences (BBC, 2009, unpagged; Frean, 2009; DfE, 2010) and have embarked on ambitious reforms without giving sufficient thought to other explanations for relative underachievement. Their outlook has limited the conceptual resources deployed in support of mobility policy and may have contributed to an over-estimate of the extent to which detailed subject knowledge and more difficult examinations can help ‘the poorest children in our country’ transcend their backgrounds (Gove, 2013, unpagged).

There is considerable evidence that class differences continue to be important and that class itself is ‘ever present in people’s lived experience’ (Archer et al., 2010: 10) and can help explain variance in many aspects of people’s attitudes and behaviour (Savage, 2000). Despite a substantial reduction in the size of the skilled working class (Bunting, 2009), shrinking trade union membership (BBC, 2012, unpagged), and the pervasive influence of individualism and individualization (Ball et al., 2000), two thirds of Britons identify themselves as working class and talk about class as a set of external benchmarks around which they can announce their own individuality

(Savage, 2007).

Working and middle class patterns remain sharply different, with class ‘everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted’ (Reay, 2006: 290). An individual’s sense of agency in education is ‘heavily structured by social class’ (Vincent, 2001: 348), while class and stratification help explain why children from families with similar characteristics of wealth, education and social networks are more likely to be educated together (Coldron et al., 2010). Goldthorpe and Mills (2008) argue that class categories still have a high degree of construct validity because they can be used to show differences across a range of life chances and choices on theoretically expected lines, for example, in relation to employment security and prospective earnings.

There are clear indications that social background is closely related to outcomes. Parents’ aspirations and attitudes to education vary by socio-economic position, with 81 per cent of the richest mothers hoping their children will go to university, compared with 37 per cent of the poorest mothers. Adverse attitudes to education ‘are one of the single most important factors associated with lower educational attainment at age 11’ (Goodman and Gregg, 2010: 6). Gregg and Macmillan (2009) draw on two British birth cohorts (see fn 3: NCDS, 1958; BCS, 1970) to conclude that the strong relationship between family income and a child’s educational attainment represents the extent to which adult outcomes mirror an individual’s childhood circumstances.

Cultural capital, transmitted through the family, seems to have a significant, cumulative impact on children’s socialization and their development as people (Bourdieu, 1977; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Thompson, 1997). Social class has been found to create distinctive parenting styles, with middle class youngsters generally gaining from ‘concerted cultivation’ while less well off families lack the economic and valued cultural resources necessary to secure equivalent benefits for their children. Differences in ‘the cultural logic of childrearing’ provide middle-class children with particular advantages but also with the skills needed to negotiate their life paths (Lareau, 2002: 748). The disposition to take children to cultural events and to encourage them to read, and to participate in the arts, music and sport, is unequally distributed across the social classes, so the less privileged are more likely to miss out (Scherger and Savage, 2010).

Ball and his colleagues were surprised by the extent to which families emerged as a more significant component of young people's social and educational experiences than they expected. They found that families played a key role in career or life planning and were also important in helping the new generation form social perspectives and generate resources for identity formation (Ball et al., 2000). Another study concluded that critical decisions often arose from perceptions that are rooted in the identity of the young person, formed through the influence of life history, social and cultural background, and interactions with significant others. These processes of socialization and identity formation help explain why less privileged students remove themselves from higher status choices and trajectories (Hodkinson et al., 1996).

Family background and early experience also help account for differences in children's responses to school and subsequent opportunities. An extra £100 per month in income when children are small is associated with a difference equivalent to one month's development. This dissimilarity is not fixed at birth but widens through childhood (National Equality Panel, 2010). Data from the MCS (see fn3) has been analysed to reveal that differences in children's intellectual, emotional and behavioural development, by parental income group, emerge at an early stage, as soon as the third birthday, and have great significance for their later achievements (Ermisch, 2008). The family is believed to be the principal social institution that fosters income inequality (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2002).

Policy-makers have continued, nevertheless, to regard education as the more or less exclusive driver of students' identities, aspirations and achievements, despite increasing evidence that variations in family resources and culture account for many of the differences in young people's development, school performance and subsequent mobility. They view the family as an obstacle to be overcome and so discount the strength, complexity and formative role of social background. This bias has been much encouraged by the large-scale quantitative designs that have predominated in recent social mobility research.

Economists, concerned with the labour market, have concentrated on intergenerational income mobility, while sociologists and politicians have been more

interested in movement between social positions, as defined within a status hierarchy (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Longitudinal, quantitative designs, based on national birth cohorts, have compared fathers' and sons' incomes at fixed points in their working lives, while women, welfare dependants and others missing from the workplace have been omitted altogether (Lambert et al., 2007). As a result, family influences on social mobility have been relatively neglected.

Our understanding of the processes that contribute to social fluidity is not much improved by these 'statistical studies of social mobility' that 'resemble the observation of a carnival through a keyhole' (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997: 6). The 'keyhole' provides an unsuitable vantage point for an investigation of the complex conditions that assist or constrain young people as they progress from school to work, and are unlikely to aid our understanding of the latent family and community processes that shape their chances of success (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Devine, 2004). We are concerned, therefore, to illuminate the background influences on young people's responses to their educational and career opportunities, rather than to provide a representative statistical account of increased or reduced life chances.

Methods

This interpretive, qualitative study, based on interviews with students, is designed to examine the ways in which family experiences have influenced respondents' growth and development, and to evaluate the impact of high performing academies on their educational and employment choices and pathways. We draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to make sense of the 'durable dispositions' acquired by respondents through their family socialisation, and to examine the ways in which family resources are transmitted between generations (Bourdieu, 1977; 1993). Our approach is guided by the case study method recommended by qualitative social mobility researchers (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997), and by Thompson's (1997) use of life history interviews.

Sample

Two highly effective case study schools, with comprehensive but above average intakes, were chosen because they match policy-makers' expectations for the conditions believed to foster social mobility. An 11 – 16 (South Park) and an 11 – 18

(Felix Holt) school were selected to facilitate comparisons and contrasts between final year students as they prepared for public examinations at age 16 and age 18.

South Park and Felix Holt (pseudonyms) are state-of-the-art academies, prototypes for a new generation of high performing schools. The Coalition believes the academy regime, generalized across England, will overcome the family circumstances that narrow life chances for too many young people and lead to persistent patterns of inequality (HMG, 2011: 3). The two academies, much admired in their respective neighbourhoods and highly praised in recent Ofsted Reports, are believed to offer capable and committed students excellent access to good examination grades, good universities and good opportunities for social mobility. Our aim is to discover the extent to which this new and ‘rigorous’ style of education is overcoming family background influences and ‘breaking barriers’ (HMG, 2011) to social mobility.

Sample characteristics are detailed in Table 1 (p. 10). Senior teachers at each school were requested to identify one group of very able students, defined as those estimated to achieve A* and A grades in all subjects (group A), and another group representing the rest of the ability range, defined as those estimated to achieve A to E grades in their examinations (group B). These samples were designed to capture differences in students’ perceptions based on their ability, school track record, social class and gender. Sample construction was purposive, in seeking students to match defined criteria, but also opportunist because we invited senior teachers at the schools to select participants and accepted changes to those listed for interview on the day in light of operational requirements and the non-attendance of some individuals.

Interviews

We conducted semi-structured paired interviews (each of 30 minutes duration) with 88 student respondents to gather rich, detailed and descriptive accounts of their experiences and expectations (Bassegy, 1999). The interviews included time for the respondents to discuss issues not directly raised by the interviewer. This highlighted further areas for investigation and contributed to the co-construction of their stories (Ellis, 1998). The meanings the respondents ‘attach to their environment and relationships’ was explored (Williams and May, 1998: 8) and questions were designed to elicit the respondents’ perceptions of their present circumstances and

future plans and to capture their understanding of their experience.

Insert Table 1: Sample Characteristics here

Ethics

The study was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's [BERA] (2011) ethical guidelines. Participants were interviewed with their parents' consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. They were advised that data would be held securely and confidentially, and that their identity would be protected. Anonymity has been ensured by removing identifying factors and by the use of pseudonyms. The respondents were volunteers who were chosen to take part in the research process. There was minimal harm or risk facing respondents arising from the research focus. The independence and integrity of the study were made clear to respondents.

Family Background and Influences

Interviews cited as Pseudonym (e.g. Jack), FH (Felix Holt) or SP (South Park), A (A group) or B (B group).
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Supportive Families

Over 70 per cent of respondents cited particular examples of their parents supporting and helping them, for example, with extra-curricular activities and work experience. Hannah (SP: A) perceived her parents as playing a vital role in her self-organization and progress:

My parents are very encouraging in terms of prompting me, getting me to places on time, encouraging me to organize, my Dad is always trying to advise me; always trying to do what's best for me in my school work, helping with projects.

Jack (FH: A), like many others, emphasised a good relationship with both parents that 'makes me feel relaxed at home and allows me to do work.' Jordan (SP: B) explained that his mother is 'behind me the whole time, encouraging me, helping me at home.' Although none of the respondents expressed discontent with the overall level of help and support they received from their parents, there were occasional criticisms of one or other parent, especially in the case of divorce or separation. Alice (SP: B), for

example, said that her main sustenance came from her mother:

I'm trying to prove my dad wrong because he thinks I'm a waste of space. I'm trying to prove I'm fine, he wants me running back to him, he left me as a child, I've grown up with my mum. It's made me more independent and more determined. My mum has motivated me to carry on with what I want to do; she's the one who has given me the support I need.

Other students offered a contrasting perspective, and emphasized the positive contribution of their fathers. Harry (FH: B) said his Dad has 'always been there for me, I look up to him a lot, he's always given me his full support', while Tony (FH: B) reported that his father had encouraged him to go to university when 'my mum didn't want me to go.'

Most students were agreed about their need for support and encouragement, as well as their resistance to overt pushing. Faith (SP: A) appreciated the fact that her parents 'don't push, they know what I can do, they know what I can get and see no point in pushing harder.' Mark (SP: A) sees himself as very fortunate because 'my family gives me lots of support behind whatever I do, so I don't feel pressured to do things'.

Resources and Identity

Parental occupations contributed to respondents' growing sense of personal identity and status. Elijah (SP: A) explained that his parents' work and income had opened unusual opportunities with great significance for his own international academic aspirations and outlook. His father is a professor at a top university, while his mother is a leading cancer researcher. Sean's (SP: A) parents are both university professors and this seems to have shaped his desire to operate 'at a high level, in a lot of detail'.

Less advantaged A group students tended to identify with a parent or parents who had shown skill and determination in overcoming financial difficulties. Andrew (FH: A) said that his lone parent mother had 'enabled him to spend thousands on cameras, despite "harder than most" financial circumstances'. He aligned himself with her skills and work ethic. Lucy (SP: A) was plainly discouraged by her father's spells of unemployment and reduced status. Fortunately her mum is 'good with money', so the family has been able to fall back on investments and savings.

For some students, illness and poverty emerged as formative elements in family histories, with long-term consequences for their personal development, self-perceptions and life chances. Anna (SP: B), for example, comes from a large, disadvantaged family that has been unable to pay for school trips, fashionable clothes or even materials for GCSE art. She has helped a lot with her brothers and sisters at home and her family role has led to work experience at a nursery and the prospect of a child-care course at a local further education college.

Leah (SP: B) presented as an able student, expected to achieve B grades at GCSE, but her brother has heart disease and everyone in the family has been affected, not least because he needs continuous care. Her father is unable to work through illness, and her mother has never been able to work because of her son's problems. Income is 'a slight problem'. Leah has a lot of issues with depression and has missed lots of lessons because she was reluctant to do the things the school was doing at the time.

These stories illustrate the extent to which young people's identities are related to family resources and to their perceptions of parental status and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1977).

Family Values and Culture

Participants acknowledged the pervasive influence of the values, climate and culture transmitted through their families. We interpreted the phrase 'family values' to denote values related to behaviour and aspirations. Mia (FH: B), for example, was aware that she acts 'a lot like my parents, talk like them, believe in the things they do. I'm an atheist because my mum is.' She was expected to achieve high grades and hopes to study history at a pre-1992 university. Jason (SP: A) emphasized his Quaker background and said he tries to abide by the basic principles that he has taken from it. Values like equality, trust, integrity and truth are important for him. Jacob (SP: A) was very conscious of his parents' influence, and argued that without strong values at home many students just opt out:

Hundreds of assemblies tell you things ... we've had a lot encouraging us to improve our grades and telling us what you need to do to be

successful but I'm pretty sure that most people have views on that from their parents.

Rob (FH: A) was aware that he had been shaped by family guidance, but was convinced nevertheless that the future was up to him: 'Your parents give you basic rules and expectations that are hard to change and set your identity but now it's all down to me.' Max's (SP: B) parents have experienced poverty and homelessness but have nevertheless passed on their outlook and priorities. He is 'entirely grateful' that he has learned a lot from a difficult life and has been brought up to live off the fruit of his own labour on the family vegetable patch. Julian (SP: B) said his father, who works as a mathematics teacher, encourages him to be as independent as possible, mainly because his own father left him when he was small. So he has bought his son a paper round business to run.

Rose (SP: A) was particularly appreciative of the values and culture espoused by her academic parents. They never put pressure on her 'because they know I'll do it for myself' but from a young age treated her as an adult and involved her as an equal in 'intelligent conversations around the dinner table.' She has always loved 'academia, knowledge and learning, especially in scientific research'. Faith's (SP: A) parents have moulded her 'by following important values needed to succeed in life', like equality and politeness. Zara (FH: B) is strongly influenced by her mother's ethos of hard work and by her uncle's success in establishing several businesses before the age of thirty. She has 'a few ideas for my own business, perhaps a cake shop or selling jewellery.' Some respondents reported that family experiences had made them cautious or described their parents as risk averse. Charlotte (FH: A) said that her parents are cautious, inclined to hold back and take no risks. She felt their attitude influenced her to think in terms of a safe career as a primary school teacher.

Respondents described how they were raised, fondly remembering parents who encouraged reading, intelligent dinner table conversation, or an interest in the wider world. They praised the care and support provided by loving families and resist pressure towards an absent parent's goals. They reflect and sometimes echo their mother and father's values and commitments, tending to learn far more from family behaviour than explicit teaching or instruction. They embrace family traditions,

interests and activities, quickly learning the literal and metaphorical music of the home as well as the skills needed for favourite pastimes. They adapt to the pressure and support of their parents and siblings, and so negotiate their distinctive choices of interest, subject and career. The issue is not that some children are helped or hindered by relative advantage or disadvantage but that home, family history and disposition are intrinsic, continuing dimensions of education. They condition every student's engagement with formal learning and contribute greatly to the diversity of response and achievement (Bourdieu, 1977).

Family Interests and Vocations

Most students reported interests and hobbies derived from their families, including grandparents. Significant links emerged between interests that seem to have originated with other family members and respondents' later choices of subject and career pathway. Isaac (SP: B), for example, accounted for his passion for animals in terms of his upbringing:

When I was brought up my parents always had animals, we've always had pets, and I have mine that I look after myself, I really, really like the idea of a job with animals. At the moment I see it as just working at a pet store. In the future I would like to run my own pet store.

Darren (FH: B) told us he 'played for an under-eight team when I was five' and that his uncle is a football coach who taught him the basics when he was young. Darren has already been offered a full-time job at a premiership soccer club, responsible for going into schools on a weekly basis and running after school clubs to teach skills. A family aptitude for and interest in the expressive arts can also become a formative influence on young people's cultural development and subsequent careers. Louise's (FH: B) father used to 'draw all the time' and she has always been interested in art. She is working on her portfolio to gain admission to a leading art school. Faith's (SP: A) father introduced her to the local youth drama group and she is now contemplating a career in the performing arts. Daniel (FH: B) said he was seeking an internship with a music studio as an entry point for the wider music industry. The main influence comes from his father, who has 'played the guitar since I was born or before'.

Some respondents bridled at following the example of parents and grandparents but were attracted to particular activities nevertheless. Owen's (SP: A) grandfather is an actuary and both his parents are scientists. He said he was reluctant to study science and maths because his parents work in that area but admitted he genuinely can't imagine doing anything else and doesn't think he would enjoy alternative subjects so much. By contrast, Rachael (FH: A) was pleased that her extended family has helped in developing her communication skills and desire to study foreign languages.

Our data confirms other qualitative studies that have found a strong continuity of interests and vocational orientation within families and argue that individual choices belong to a wider pattern of adaptation to economic opportunity and change (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997).

Family Employment Patterns and Influences

Most respondents reported that parents were a strong influence on their aspirations and occupational choices and many indicated that family members work in similar or analogous occupations. Group A students at South Park named a range of academic, scientific and technical interests and aspirations that were closely related to their parental backgrounds. Rose (SP: A), whose researcher father holds 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 (SP: A), whose parents are both scientists, identified marine biology or high-energy physics as potential areas of doctoral study. Sean (SP: A), whose parents are both professors, wants to work in science, though he doesn't have a particular course in mind: 'I'd like to study at a high level, in a lot of detail.'

Isabella (SP: A), whose parents are scientists, hoped for a career in sports medicine. Chloe (SP: A), with academic parents, was keen to study medicine and said that her friends and family have helped her understanding of medicine and medical careers. Some of her friends' parents are doctors or surgeons and 'from what they've said it sounds really interesting.'

Family connections and influences were equally important for B group members at South Park, especially in accessing local opportunities. Sandy (SP: B) already worked Saturdays at her mother's hairdressing salon and described plans for improving the business when she qualified. Patrick (SP: B) 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 also thought plumbing was an attractive career option. Gavin (SP: B) was keen to follow his father into the police force. He was completing a diploma in public services intended for bus drivers, librarians, and the police, and said his father was trying to find a suitable training opportunity for when he left school.

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' (Bourdieu, 1977). 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).

Over 60 per cent of students at Felix Holt reported two or more relatives in similar or related jobs, evidence of occupational links across generations of the same family. Lance's (FH: A) father and grandfather were telecommunication engineers, for example; both Jack's (FH: A) parents are accountants, while three of his grandparents were involved in motor transport. Lucy's (FH: A) mother and paternal grandfather were both telephone company managers. Rachael's (FH: A) father and three of her grandparents were involved in carpentry or gardening. Rebecca's (FH: A) family includes three teachers. Seven students reported family members involved in engineering, electronics and electrical work. Charlotte's (FH: A) father and grandfather were trade managers, while her mother is one of three teaching assistants in the cohort whose children plan to become teachers.

Many students described a disposition closely related to family interests, hobbies and occupations. Several A group members referred to close relatives as the inspiration for their career preferences. When Lance (FH: A) was young, for example, he spent a lot of time at his grandfather's house and remembers that 'he was always doing

electronic stuff and that has led to where I am now'. His parents have encouraged his interest, and have made sure that he has participated in relevant extra-curricular activities, trips and work experience. At the time of his interview, Lance had decided to become a chartered engineer and recognised that his grandfather (an electrician with BT) and parents have helped develop the groundwork for his career.

Michael (FH: A) also reported that he had picked up a lot of knowledge and understanding from family members involved in engineering. Rebecca (FH: A), whose grandmother was a nurse, feels that her mother has been overbearing in her 'desperation for me to become a doctor' but she nevertheless values her family's encouragement to pursue a medical career and their practical help with work experience. These manoeuvres illustrate the influence of family habitus as well as 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 smoothes 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 mobilise available family resources to secure a toehold in the job market. Tony (FH: B) had already worked for his father and was prepared to sacrifice his independence for the time being. Dave (FH: B) was also realistic and recognised 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.

Simon (FH: B) is an example of a B group student who expected to rise in the world despite less strong predicted grades. He explained how he would enter the media and work his way up through family contacts. One relative owns a media production company and has contacts at the BBC; his father's partner is a TV director who has worked with celebrities on cooking shows. The contrast between Simon 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 have drawn, and continue to draw upon, varied sources of family capital. Regardless of background and ability, every student's account was permeated by an awareness that the family, past and present, continued to be important in their individual lives. This is consistent with a 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 (Vincent, 1997). It also confirms the conclusion that parents routinely mobilise resources to help their children 'through the education system and into good jobs' (Devine, 2004: 11).

Advantaged, Disadvantaged

Despite the intensely positive outlook promoted by both schools and displayed by almost every student, there is troubling evidence that patterns of inequality continue to be 'imprinted from one generation to the next' (HMG, 2011). Although no student referred to social class and few considered themselves disadvantaged or suffering from obstacles to future success, there were numerous instances amongst less academically successful B group members of parents affected by low status or broken employment, economic pressure, ill health and family break up.

A high proportion of South Park A group students said they were advantaged and many reported that their parents held positions as leading academics, scientific researchers and teachers. Rose (SP: A) said she was 'reasonably advantaged'. Sean (SP: A) said he is advantaged because both his parents are professors, while Jacob (SP: A) felt 'privileged because we have a nice house' and the 'financial crash hasn't affected us.' Students who identified themselves as coming from 'average' backgrounds were more cautious. Sophie (SP: A) considered that her 'family is about average, we don't have masses of money but are not exactly poor.' No A group student considered themselves disadvantaged, under-privileged or poor.

By contrast, a majority of the South Park B group believed they were average or disadvantaged, and there were numerous references to financial pressure, family

break-up and other difficulties arising from illness or disability. Occupational backgrounds were mainly related to the local economy (e.g. hairdresser, decorator, cleaner) and often included periods of unemployment. Max (SP: B) remembered that his parents were ‘living in a squat when I was born’ and said the family has ‘never really had much money.’ Anna (SP: B) admitted that ‘we’re quite disadvantaged, we don’t get as much money as others, it affects going on school trips and things.’

A minority of Felix Holt students deemed themselves to be advantaged. Charlotte (FH: A) considered that she has been ‘quite lucky’ while Jack (FH: A) said his family was probably ‘a little above average in that parents have well paid jobs’ but explained his mother was only part time and his father’s wages have to be ‘shared out amongst four children.’ Gemma (FH: A) was appreciative of the advantages she enjoyed but also acknowledged that her father had been made redundant, so could no longer afford to send her round the world, like people she met on interview at a prestigious university.

A majority of Felix Holt students described themselves as ‘average’ but also mentioned a variety of domestic pressures. Andrew (FH: A) said that he was living in a tight financial situation, while Michael (FH: A) noted that ‘as the recession hit my step dad found it hard to get work and money became tight and there have been cutbacks.’ Holly (FH: B) felt that ‘we’re comfortable at the moment but we’re living on savings rather than current income.’

B group students at Felix Holt were much more likely to cite personal experiences of separation and divorce, and also to acknowledge the ways in which family breakdown may compound financial difficulty. Darren’s (FH: B) father left when he was two days old, so ‘my knowledge of his background is minimal, I’m not even sure of his country of origin.’ Simon (FH: B) spent a lot of time travelling between his father in London and his mother who lives near the school, while Joyce (FH: B) referred to her parents’ divorce and being brought up by her mother over the last ten years. She felt that divorce and financial difficulties have brought them ‘down in the world’.

These stories help explain why a large minority of students at South Park (33 per cent) and at Felix Holt (40 per cent) fail to attain the much desired, mobility-friendly

good GCSE threshold (5A*-C grades including English and mathematics). The schools may well attract balanced or 'mixed' intakes, with fewer students eligible for free school meals than average, but less advantaged students continue to trail their peers, however dedicated their teachers and however determined they are themselves. Poorer students continue to achieve less good results, even at highly effective schools (Cook, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

Policy-makers have construed family background and circumstances as hindrances to be overcome so that poor students enjoy similar opportunities to their wealthier peers. They envision academies as centres of social engineering, where high expectations and high quality teaching enable every hard working and determined person to succeed. This approach is similar to that adopted under New Labour, when policy was designed to change the attitudes and behaviour of 'socially excluded' families, described in formulaic terms as living in 'challenging circumstances' or in 'areas of disadvantage'. Gewirtz (2001: 136) argues that New Labour policy gurus aimed to reconstruct and transform working class parents into middle class ones, with excellence for the many to be achieved in part by 'making the many behave like the few.' The Coalition's plan that every child should attend a school as good as the best in the independent sector is based on the same desire to rescue the less fortunate from their families and to immerse them in elite learning and culture. Properly educated at last, the disadvantaged will be equipped to match the examination and career success achieved by those who attend famous private schools.

Our qualitative data offers a contrasting picture of the role of family background, culture and capital in respondents' lives and suggests that these influences can be positive as well as negative and affect everyone, not just the disadvantaged. The family is not an independent variable to be overcome but the source of a rich mixture of dispositions that are imprinted through childhood and play a vital part in people's growth, learning and outlook (Bourdieu, 1977). For individuals when young the future may seem 'entirely in my own hands' but below the surface, life and fate are subject to the 'past experiences ... deposited in each organism' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). The family is on the inside of children's development, while the school is on the

outside, looking in with a measure of frustration when pupils do not behave as teachers should like them to do.

Regardless of background and circumstances, our respondents provided countless instances of valued parental support and encouragement. They acknowledged their parents' expectations of them and emphasised the importance of positive family relationships for their own happiness. Students from poor backgrounds were equally likely to speak positively about their parents' care and attention. Caring families played an important role in enabling the young people to sustain their effort. Our two schools show parents, teachers and students sharing common goals and collaborating effectively to achieve them.

Participants were also eager to claim they were not hindered by poverty, lack of resources or other negative circumstances. They acknowledged personal difficulties but invariably described these as challenges, not as explanations for lack of success. B group members were much more likely to cite examples of personal and family stress, but they remained optimistic, nevertheless, about their prospects and opportunities. This supports the argument that good schools can create a climate where youngsters work hard and aim to achieve great results. But it is much less clear that the effects of disadvantage can be overcome. Less successful students at both schools were more likely to assess themselves as 'disadvantaged' and their families were very often troubled by financial, emotional and health issues. B group members were also more likely to be following vocational tracks towards less prestigious employment.

Family background and resources played an important role in shaping respondents' identities, outlook, values, interests and vocational aspirations. Parental occupations were a significant influence on participants' growing sense of personal status and identity. The majority of South Park A group members, for example, were very much aware of their parents' professional occupations and regarded themselves as intelligent, capable people. They spoke confidently about their options and careers and assumed they would study at prestigious universities before progressing to high level, knowledge-based work. Some less advantaged students identified with mothers or fathers who have overcome redundancy, unemployment and financial difficulties, and succeeded too in holding their families together. Other stories of disadvantage led

us to conclude that illness and poverty may have long-term consequences for young people's personal development, self-perceptions and life chances.

Students were strongly influenced by family values, climate and culture in a variety of ways. They often attributed their interests to family members, including parents, grandparents and other significant relatives. Our sample provided many examples of rich and diverse family lives that contributed to the formation of values and interests. Family habitus was important, with interests in art (Louise, FH: B, Andrew, FH: A), music (Daniel, FH: B, and Richard, SP: A), languages (Rachael, FH: A) and sport (Mary, FH: B, Carl, SP: B, Jordan, SP: B) emulated and developed by the next generation. Respondents' stories refer to many twists of fortune and illustrate the accumulation of small (and sometimes large) advantages and disadvantages that help and hinder individual progress (Gladwell, 2008).

Families have a formative influence in young people's lives and their role needs to be understood before we can hope to explain the relationship between relative wealth, education and social mobility. Our sample seems no less influenced by family and community antecedents, models and culture than previous generations, and there is some evidence that career tracks and choices also have deep roots in family history. We challenge the idea that schools can in some way 'overcome' the family experiences that shape the way people are, and through the students' stories present evidence that parents, siblings and other significant relatives work to produce social stability rather than change or transformation. There is little sign that South Park and Felix Holt have overcome family influences or reduced the effects of relative poverty. These new academies achieve their success by working with the grain rather than against it.

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