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School of Education

The 'aspiration' discourse and its negotiation in the school context

A Foucaultian analysis

Konstanze Spohrer

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Abstract

The "lack" or "poverty" of aspirations among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has become a much discussed topic in UK policy, being regarded as one of the key reasons for stagnating social mobility. While 'aspiration' has been the object of previous research, there is no study which adopts a discourse analytic approach to examining the policy debate, its enactment and its negotiation in an educational context. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, this thesis examines and compares the discursive constructions underpinning policy debates, school practices and young people's constructions of their futures.

The study includes an analysis of policy documents in the UK from 1997 – 2011 and an in-depth study in a secondary school using interviews, group discussions, observation and documentation. Drawing on frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis, the data from policy, school and pupils were first analysed separately and then examined for convergences and divergences.

The analysis identified that the discourse of 'aspiration' in policy and among teachers was conveyed to the pupils though a discourse on 'success' promoting Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations, as well as attitudes and behaviours which allow realising these aims. Among the young people, some pupils aligned themselves fully with the discourse of success, while others negotiated the demand to 'aim high' with their perception of lacking innate ability. Resistance was mainly expressed by dissociating from adopting an 'aspirational' personality and behaviour. When describing their desirable futures, an alternative version of success was drawn upon by most young people, seeing (good) work as a way to realise immediate and later life preferences and avoid social failure. The findings suggest a dominance of the aspiration discourse and the need to see young people's constructions of their futures as taking place in a web of discursive and non-discursive demands, inseparable from their social contexts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and background

1.1 The genesis of this PhD project

This project examines the discursive patterns underlying policy debates on aspiration, school practices around aspiration, and young people's constructions of their futures. While in most research 'aspiration' tends to be taken as a given quality in individuals, this study is concerned with how ideas around aspiration are constructed, enacted and negotiated in different spheres. In the remainder of this thesis, the term 'aspiration' is used in this sense.

The particular focus of this study was developed during the initial phase of the PhD. Having planned to investigate influences on the aspirations among young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, I familiarised myself with the literature on young people's aspirations, transitions and decision making. It became clear that 'aspiration' is a term that emerged relatively recently in academic literature, as well as in policy documents and in the media. From about the mid 2000s, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been described as having a "lack of aspiration" and affected by a "poverty of aspiration". These descriptions have been drawn upon when trying to explain persisting social inequalities in educational attainment and participation. In policy documents, the aspirations of young people have been seen as a lever for interventions, resulting in a number of initiatives to "raise aspirations".

Following on from this observation, I became interested in examining the origins of the focus on aspiration and whether it was indicative of a new way of thinking about educational inequalities. Furthermore, I wondered what effects this debate would have on the ground, that is in those settings in which aspirations were supposed to be raised and among the groups who were targeted by these interventions. I, therefore, decided to examine the evolution of the debate on aspiration and the ways in which it is taken up in an educational setting, both by professionals and young people. I had begun to understand 'aspiration' not as a given entity, but as constructed in policy debates and other contexts.

Early on, I was encouraged to familiarise myself with the work on discourse by Michel Foucault in order to inform my approach to examining policy debates. As a consequence, I began to conceptualise 'aspiration' as discursively constructed. Three insights provided the basis for framing my research questions. The first insight concerns the idea that discourse has "real" consequences in that it provides humans with the conceptual tools to understand themselves and the world around them. Secondly, I assumed that discourse does not only come into being through language, but is enacted through institutional practices, everyday interactions, as well as physical and spatial expressions. Finally, I began to understand that discourse is always contested and constantly transformed when it is enacted in practice. Based on these assumptions, I started to examine how ideas around 'aspiration' are constructed in policy debates, how they are enacted in educational practice and how young people negotiate and appropriate them.

Over the course of the study, I realised that applying Foucault's theoretical concepts to my research problem had limitations and raised epistemological, theoretical and methodological questions. Foucault's own work was concerned with understanding broad historic shifts in scientific disciplines, and thus not easily transferable to examining a concrete topic and its manifestation in everyday discursive practice. In addition to this, Foucault's ideas evolved over several decades, which led to the question as to which concepts and assumptions should be adopted. A further challenge was the realisation that, in Foucault's work, social class and social disadvantage were absent as problems. This raised the question if Foucault's concepts could be used in a study which accepts that social disadvantage exists. How could Foucault's approach, which is typically described as highly constructivist, be combined with an approach which considers social class as "real"?

The challenge of "putting Foucault to work" (Nicholls, 2009) as well as reconciling a Foucaultian approach with a critical, more realist approach, were problems that I grappled with throughout the PhD process. Therefore, this thesis not only answers the research issues around aspiration detailed above, but also comprises reflections

on the usefulness of using a Foucaultian lens for studying social disadvantage and aspiration.

1.2 Situating the study in the academic debate

This study builds on and aims to contribute to two scholarly fields. The first field comprises a body of research which examines the relationship between young people's socio-economic background and their orientations towards the future, in particular with respect to their post-school educational and occupational plans, hopes and motivations. In this field, qualitative-critical approaches have illuminated how young people's aspirations are shaped by their positions in intersecting dimensions of inequality, which result in specific identity positions, and habitus (Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007; Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendrick, 2010; Ball, David, & Reay, 2005; Bradford & Hey, 2007). These studies suggest that the dispositions of young people from working class backgrounds tend to be at odds with the culture, structure and expectations of the educational system. This situation thus produces tensions between the young people's orientations and dominant ideas of educational success and participation.

Secondly, this study builds on a growing field of research which draws on Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and discursive practice. While Foucault's work has traditionally been applied to the study of historical phenomena and drawn upon to analyse documents, an increasing number of authors have advocated mobilising Foucault's concepts to examine discourse in everyday context, including institutional practice, everyday interactions and subjectivity (Ball, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008; McKee, 2009). Several approaches of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis (FDA) have been developed, aiming to operationalise Foucault's concepts in order to study a range of empirical materials (see, for example, Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Rose, 2007; Willig, 2008). These authors have stated that a Foucaultian approach has the potential to identify discourses and discursive patterns, as well as to examine the workings of power by tracing discourse and resistance. Authors who have worked with a Foucaultian approach in educational research have pointed out

that political and dominant discourses are negotiated, transformed and resisted at a local and subjective level.

This PhD project brings the above-mentioned fields together by comparing discursive patterns underlying policy on young people's aspirations and practices of raising aspiration with young people's constructions of their futures. The study intends to highlight how young people's constructions of their futures are impacted on by demands issued by policy discourse against a background of their social positioning. It, thus, avoids defining 'aspiration' as a given quality in individuals and regards it a discursively constructed element, which nevertheless has "real" effects on young people, in that it provides knowledge and exerts demands on subjectivity and action.

In adopting a Foucaultian approach and studying aspiration in different spheres, this project contributes to an emerging field of research in the UK examining the debate on aspiration and its effects on educational practice and young people. Raco (2009) has stimulated the debate with a deconstructive analysis of the aspiration discourse in social/welfare policy, identifying it as indicative of a shift towards a new model of citizenship. In his article, Raco (2009) calls for ethnographic research which would "enable researchers to examine the ways in which policy discourses are translated, internalised, and in turn shape the governmentalities of individuals and communities" (p. 443).

Examining the local effects of aspiration was the main focus in the first issue of the journal Children's Geographies in 2011. The contributions examine enactments of discourses of aspiration in several institutional and geographical locales, and actors within them, including education professionals and schools (Brown, 2011; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Purcell, 2011) and young people (Bright, 2011; Brown, 2011). All the contributions identify discrepancies between policy objectives and/or discourses and local enactments. Next to this debate in the field of social geography, there have been some authors in the field of educational research who have compared

policy discourse with school practices and policy discourse with young people's accounts (see Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Bradford & Hey, 2007).

Although the literature has highlighted discrepancies and overlaps between policy discourse, institutional practice and discourse and individuals' accounts, there is so far no study which systematically applies Foucaultian Discourse Analysis to all these levels. By tracing aspiration discourses through the different spheres, this thesis identifies the specific effects the recent debate might have on local practices and subjectivity of individuals. By examining how discourses on aspiration are negotiated, transformed and resisted, the thesis illuminates the power effects of policy discourse as well as the possibilities to resist and appropriate the understandings and demands exerted by it. Thus, the study goes beyond approaches which focus on the individual and their backgrounds.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2, *Educational inequalities in UK policy debates,* gives an overview of how educational inequalities have been discussed in policy debates in the UK since the 1950s, with a focus on social class inequalities. The first section outlines how social disadvantage and educational attainment has been discussed more widely, while section two focuses on debates on participation in post-compulsory education in Scotland and the UK. Section three gives an overview of interventions aimed at raising aspirations, which are situated in the latter debate.

Chapter 3, *Literature Review,* discusses how young people's aspirations have been researched, in particular with respect to understanding their relationship with socio-economic disadvantage. While the first section shows how aspiration has been a problem within different theoretical strands during the second half of the 20th century, section two outlines contemporary debates which discuss 'aspiration' in the context of participation in post-compulsory education. The third section discusses recent research on aspiration in policy discourse and the impacts of these debates on educational practice and young people's constructions. At the end of the chapter, the gaps in research and the research questions are identified.

Chapter 4, *Theoretical background and framework,* outlines the theoretical background of this study. It first clarifies Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse and its relation to the concepts of power and subjectivity. Secondly, criticisms of Foucault's work are discussed, focussing on problems of the boundaries of discourse, agency and discourse in everyday contexts. The third section outlines how Foucault's concepts were further developed by other authors in order to provide an understanding of discourse in policy, in institutional settings and in individual accounts.

Chapter 5, *Methodology and methods,* first discusses the epistemological foundations of the study and the guiding conceptual and the methodological approach of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis. After discussing the choice of the data sources and the research setting, the methods of data collection are outlined. This includes a rationale for choosing the methods of data collection, the sampling considerations and reflections on how the study was conducted. Following a discussion of ethical considerations, the steps adopted for analysing the data from the different sources are outlined.

Chapters 6 to 8 present the findings from the analysis of policy documents and school study. Chapter 6, *The construction of aspiration in policy,* shows how aspiration has become a "problem" in policy, which subject positions and solutions are proposed and what "moral obligations" this places on schools and young people. Chapter 7, *The school's enactment of aspiration*, presents how the school staff problematised aspiration and how ideas on aspiration were conveyed to the pupils. Chapter 8, *The young people's negotiation of ideas on aspiration*, shows how the young people negotiated "moral obligations" and messages encountered in school.

Chapter 9, *Comparing discursive constructions in policy, school and among young people,* brings the findings from all three spheres together, analysing them in the light of the theoretical concepts. After identifying convergences and divergences between policy, school and young people, conclusions are drawn about the ways in which the aspiration discourse is negotiated. This is followed by a final summarising

section which highlights which forms of subjectivity and action are legitimised and which silenced.

Chapter 10 *Discussion of findings,* discusses the findings of this study in relation to other research. The chapter is structured according to the research questions, discussing the findings from the policy analysis first, followed by the findings on the school's enactment and the findings on the young people's negotiation of ideas on aspiration.

The final chapter, *Conclusions*, presents a summary of the findings, outlines the limitations and contributions of the study and presents implications for further research, policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Educational inequalities in UK policy debates

In the UK, educational attainment and participation continue to be strongly linked to socio-economic background. Studies show that the difference in educational attainment between individuals whose parents are educated to degree level and those whose parents have not reached minimum qualifications has only slightly decreased over the last 30 years (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; The Sutton Trust, 2010). This difference, often referred to as the "achievement gap", is among the highest in the developed world (The Sutton Trust, 2011). Inequalities with regard to participation in post-compulsory education are equally pronounced, in particular with respect to Higher Education. Research evidence shows that although overall participation levels in Higher Education have increased, inequalities between the most privileged and the most disadvantaged groups have widened over the last 40 years (Blanden & Machin, 2004; Galindo-Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez, & Vignoles, 2004).

The strong correlation between socio-economic background and educational attainment has been a topic for research for decades and has been seen as a societal problem that needs to be addressed through public policy. This chapter gives an overview of how educational inequalities have featured in policy debates and intends to locate the discourse on young people's aspirations within these debates.

The first section traces the policy debate on social disadvantage and educational inequality in the UK from the second half of the 20th century until the present day. It shows how this topic is made relevant in policy discourse and sought to be addressed by policy measures. The section concentrates on policy debates in the 2000s. These set the context for this study and it is during this time that the debate on young people's aspirations emerged. Having established that the discourse on aspiration is prevalent mainly in the context of unequal participation in post-compulsory education, the second section focuses on policies on widening participation in post-compulsory education. It aims to draw out the main features of this strand of policy, also by drawing on academic analyses. The third section takes a closer look at public interventions undertaken to raise young people's aspirations, which originated in the

context of widening participation strategies and were later embraced in other policy fields and strategies.

Policy debates and developments in Scotland and the UK as a whole will be discussed. Although the study is undertaken in the Scottish context, it is assumed that Scottish policy and everyday debate are influenced by the policy agenda and discourse in Westminster (Jones, 2003). Although policy outcomes, style and content vary, the policy objectives within different countries in the UK have been described as converging, as they are influenced by global policy discourse (Gunning & Raffe, 2011; Jones, 2003; Raffe, 2004).

Alongside tracing developments in policy, the chapter also points to the trends in educational attainment and participation, as well as trends in research on educational inequalities. Although academic and political debates do not neatly map onto each other, they can be seen as interrelated and mutually influencing. A more in-depth review of the academic literature on social disadvantage and education is undertaken in Chapter 3.

2.1 Social disadvantage and educational attainment

In the UK, an individual's educational attainment continues to be strongly linked to their socio-economic background. Studies have shown that the difference in educational attainment between individuals whose parents are educated to degree level and those whose parents have not reached minimum qualifications has only slightly decreased over the last 30 years (The Sutton Trust, 2010). This difference, often referred to as the "achievement gap", is among the highest in the developed world (The Sutton Trust, 2011). While at 16 years of age inequalities are more pronounced in England than in Scotland, the "achievement gap" at age 18 is larger in Scotland (Raffe, Croxford, Iannelli, Shapira, & Howieson, 2006). While family background has a direct influence on children's attainment, it also operates through access to more or less advantaged schools. A study by the Sutton Trust (2009)

showed that after taking into account individual factors, there is a large difference in attainment between children attending schools in the most and least deprived areas.

Early debates on unequal educational outcomes and participation can be found in socialist politics in the 1930s and 1940s, centring on the issue of "equal opportunity" for working class young people (Silver, 1973). While the Education Act in 1944 can be seen as one landmark in increasing the participation across societal groups by granting free secondary school education for all, issues of unequal participation became central to the political agenda in the 1950s and 1960s (Ball, 2008). During this time, several reports problematised that a disproportionately high number of working class people did not participate in post-compulsory education. Indicative of this political tendency are the Early Leaving Report from 1954 and the Robbins Report on Higher Education in 1963 (Ministry of Education, 1963), which are widely seen as the first documents which call for the expansion of participation in Higher Education among all societal strata (Chitty, 2009; Ross, 2003b).

Parallel to the political debate, educational inequality related to social class became a topic in the developing field of Sociology of Education in the UK (Silver, 1973). A field of research on social class, social mobility and educational opportunity developed, examining the relationship between the social origin of individuals, their educational attainment and their social destinations (see, for example, the work of Floud, Halsey, & Martin, 1956; Glass, 1963). These works showed that social class background and educational attainment were closely interlinked and thus led to a reproduction of the social structure (Ball, 2008). In the early 1970s, this strand of research was joined by a new school in Sociology of Education, influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives. Scholars working in this tradition examined educational inequalities in the context of capitalist, class-based societies.

In the late 1970s, educational policy became increasingly shaped by the ideas of the New Right, a political grouping influenced by neo-liberalism and neo-conservativism (Ball, 2008; Trowler, 2003). During the time of the Conservative government between 1979 and 1997, economic principles increasingly gained

prominence over concerns of equality. Economic principles were entrenched in a political agenda which was focussed on improving standards to ensure international economic competitiveness and adopted competition and choice as the guiding principles (ibid.). In this climate, issues of social disadvantage and inequality became sidelined in the political, as well as in the academic debate. Ross (2003a) argues that this concerned, in particular, inequalities related to social class: "discourses of disadvantage and social exclusion were largely muted: virtually silenced in the case of social class and in terms of the ethic minorities addressed on a sporadic basis in response to outbreaks of urban unrest" (pp. 62-63).

The Labour government, which came into office in 1997, placed inequality and disadvantage – including educational inequality – on the agenda again. Endorsing the market principles of competition and choice, introduced by the previous government, it combined them with a concern for equality and social justice (Ball, 2008; Jary, 2005; Lunt, 2008; Power & Whitty, 1999). The tendency to merge principles of marketisation with a social justice agenda can be seen as one of the core ideas of the so called "Third Way" philosophy, which heavily influenced New Labour (Naidoo, 2000).

During the time of the Labour party's government, socio-economic inequalities, and their relation with unequal educational outcomes, were framed as a problem of "social exclusion". Tackling social exclusion was seen as a central aim of the government, and was seen to be realised by improving educational outcomes in particular among "deprived" and "excluded" groups (Levitas, 2005). New Labour's concern with educational (in)equality became manifest both in a concern with "performance" and "participation" (Ball, 2008). While the former found expression in problematising "underachievement" of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and "failing schools" in deprived urban areas (see, for example, Department for Education and Skills, 1997, 2001) , the latter can be seen as reflected in a concern of widening participation in post-compulsory education in response to the Dearing Report in 1997 (Chitty, 2009; Ross, 2003a).

Although all aspects of education had become devolved to the Scottish Executive in 1990 (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011), the Scottish education policy agenda shared similar concerns with the English one in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This can be seen as an outcome of the influence of a global policy discourse, affecting all parts of the UK (Ball, 2008; Gunning & Raffe, 2011). Furthermore, the policies by the Scottish Labour Party, which formed the Scottish Executive in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats from 1999 until 2007, have been described as closely aligned with those by the Labour Party in Westminster (Nixon, Walker, & Baron, 2002a).

Similar to the English agenda, Scottish education policy from the late 1990s has been concerned with the "attainment gap" between young people from different socio-economic groups and inequalities in participation in post-compulsory education (Gallacher, 2006). This can be seen as embedded in wider efforts of tackling poverty and social disadvantage, set out in Closing the Opportunity Gap, a strategy which has been pursued since 1999 (Scottish Government, 2007). Besides setting out the goal to improve attainment of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Scottish Executive has been committed to increasing participation in post-compulsory education from the late 1990s (Gallacher, 2006; Gallacher & Raffe, 2011). In both the UK and in Scotland 'widening participation' has become an important element within the lifelong learning agenda, which was pursued by the Labour government after it came into power in Westminster in 1997 and is reflected in Scottish policy through a Green Paper on lifelong learning in 1998 and the Lifelong Learning Strategy published by the Scottish Executive in 2003 (Gallacher, 2006).

Comparing the debate on educational inequality in the 1950s and 60s with the policy agenda from the late 1990s, several similarities can be identified with regard to the underpinning rationales. In both debates, the social justice concern is interlinked with an economic rationale, which presents the changing demands of the economy as creating the need for a more highly-skilled workforce. While the 1950s and 60s made reference to an economic shift towards the "service industries", the debates in the late 1990s can be seen as influenced by the discourse on the needs of the

"knowledge economy" (Ball, 2008; Gunning & Raffe, 2011; Olssen, O'Neill, & Codd, 2004), both in the UK as a whole and in Scotland (Peters, 2001).

The economic rationale underpinning the call for widening participation is usually mentioned alongside an objective of creating "social justice" or "fairness". Based on the assumption that educational success leads to better occupational opportunities and thus to better life outcomes, promoting participation of so far under-represented groups at all levels of education is seen as a matter of "social justice". This implies that social justice is seen as a matter of providing equal chances rather than equal outcomes. Furthermore, it implies that individuals are not entitled to acquire certain goods and positions but have to earn them through their "merits". Although these ideas gained new emphasis during the time of New Labour, they are not new concerns. Halsey (1972) noted that that the debate on equal opportunity in the 1960s was characterised by a combination of "efficiency and equality" and had led to "policies designed to create and maintain a meritocracy" (p. 6).

The aim of realising a meritocratic society was emphasised in Labour's last term in office, particularly by Gordon Brown during his time as Prime Minister. It replaced the concern of "social inclusion", the key strategy while Tony Blair was in office. Under Brown, the emphasis on meritocracy went alongside a policy focus on creating more "social mobility", which implied creating upward social mobility for socially disadvantaged groups. More social mobility was presented as a way to tackle poverty and disadvantage, which in turn led to more economic prosperity as well as benefits for the individual and thus more social justice.

The assumptions made in policy in the late 1990s and 2000s bear striking similarities with those in the 1960s. Both presume that ability among disadvantaged groups is "wasted" and "untapped" and that, consequently, the "pool of ability" needs to be widened (Ross, 2003a; Silver, 1973). Ball (2008) cites Gillborn & Youdell (2000) and argues that New Labour promotes a new "IQsm", suggesting a need to allow "talented" young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to realise their potential.

While in the 1950s and 1960s, "equal opportunity" was sought to be realised primarily by extending education *provision*, e.g. through raising the leaving age to 16, the main strategy under New Labour was that of improving *access* to post-compulsory education and Higher Education in particular (Ball, 2008). In the more recent policy debate, this tended to be expressed by stating the aim of removing "barriers" to educational attainment and participation and redistribute "possibilities" (ibid., pp. 180-181). This was sought to be achieved by tackling structural barriers, such as admission procedures, and by tackling the inner assets of individuals, including educational attainment and attitudes (Jones & Thomas, 2005; Stevenson, Clegg, & Lefever, 2010).

Targeting individuals rather than structures can be seen as an expression of a wider trend towards "responsibilising" individuals for their "life outcomes", identified across New Labour's policies (Carabine, 2007; Clarke, 2005). Several authors have argued that this tendency is indicative of a more general shift in welfare states under the influence of neo-liberal thought (see, for example, Du Gay, 1996; Francis & Hey, 2009; Rose, 1999).

Several authors have concluded that educational policy at the time of the New Labour government has increasingly problematised and targeted the behaviour and attitudes of working class groups. Gillies (2005) and Gewirtz (2001) detect that, in particular, working class parents tended to be portrayed as lacking in skills and "moral responsibility" to promote the educational success of their children. In the context of widening participation policies, it has been argued that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are ascribed a "deficit", either with respect to a lack of attainment or regarding their attitudes towards Higher Education (see Baxter, Tate, & Hatt, 2007 for a summary of this critique). This "deficit view", according to several authors, "pathologises" the (white) working class and individualises responsibility for educational disadvantage (Ball, 2008; Reay, 2009).

Alongside presenting socially disadvantaged groups as the cause of educational disadvantage, policies under New Labour have increasingly sought to tackle their

attitudes and behaviours. This tendency has been described as efforts of "resocializing" working class individuals (Gewirtz, 2001) and "remoralising" society (Ball, 2008). This means that the state places responsibility on the individual to adopt the right – that is middle-class – attributes but also foresees the possibility of intervention if individuals fail to meet their obligations (ibid.). The principles of deferring responsibility and acknowledging the necessity of possible intervention are thus concurrent in New Labour policy.

It is in this context of meritocratic and individualising discourse, that unequal educational outcomes become increasingly attributed to attitudinal deficits in young people, among them a deficit in aspiration. In particular, in English policy documents from the early 2000s onwards, 'aspiration' is mentioned as an attribute that positively influences educational attainment and participation. Young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are portrayed as lacking in aspiration and thus 'raising aspirations' among this group is identified as a policy strategy. Besides mentioning raising aspiration as a general objective (see Department for Education and Skills, 2003a, 2003b; Department for Education and Skills, 2005b, 2006), the aspirations of young people are sought to be specifically targeted by a number of initiatives, in particular, in the context of widening participation and improving attainment in Scotland and England. The next section presents policies on widening participation in Scotland and other parts of the UK before outlining initiatives designed to raise aspirations.

2.2 Participation in post-compulsory education

The social composition of universities has been a cause for concern since the 19th century, and it received renewed attention in the 1960s (Kettley, 2007). The report by the Robbins Committee in 1963 is seen as the first document that makes a case for a major expansion of Higher Education and established the need to increase the participation of formerly under-represented groups, in particular women and young people from working class backgrounds (Greenbank, 2006; Ross, 2003b). The recommendations regarding widening access are underpinned by the idea of the

existence of an untapped "pool of ability" of young people who could benefit from Higher Education but are hindered from doing so (Ross, 2003b).

The debate on widening participation resurged in the mid 1990s. At this point, the overall participation in Higher Education had continuously risen and experienced a sharp increase since the late 1980s (Ross, 2003a). While the participation rates of all social classes had increased since the Robbins Report, the growth was largest among the middle-class (Egerton & Halsey, 1993). Thus, inequalities in participation with respect to social class remained stark; while 45 per cent of the highest-ranked socio-economic group participated in Higher Education in 1995, only around 15 per cent from the lowest class did so (Robertson & Hillman, 1997).

With a view to planning the future expansion of the Higher Education system and gathering consistent data on the composition of the student body, the Conservative government appointed a committee headed by Sir Ron Dearing (Ross, 2003b). Its report, Higher Education and the Learning Society, published after the Labour government was elected in 1997, recommended increasing overall participation in Higher Education to a national average of 45 per cent, as well as improving access for "under-represented groups" (Dearing, 1997). The report included a separate part for Scotland, the Garrick Report. Although it acknowledged that the Scottish Higher Education system had succeeded in attracting students from diverse backgrounds, including the lower socio-economic groups, the document asserted that social class differences in participation remained, particularly in urban areas. Furthermore, the report highlighted that working class students were over-represented in Further Education colleges (ibid.).

The debate on widening participation in the late 1990s can be seen as influenced by a debate on the transformation towards a "knowledge economy" and the resulting endeavour of creating a "learning society". This is seen as driven through advances in communication and information technology and increasing global competition (Dearing, 1997). The need for a more highly-qualified workforce underpins the two

areas of improvement set out by the White Paper published by the Labour government in response to the Dearing Report:

> *First, the expansion of higher education has not yet extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds. In Britain today too many of those born into less advantaged families still see a university place as being beyond their reach, whatever their ability. Second, we have to make better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation. (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, p. 2)*

Aiming to increase the levels of educational participation in the population, the comparatively lower levels of participation among socio-economically disadvantaged groups were rediscovered as a "problem".

In reaction to the Dearing Report, the newly elected Labour government stated its aim of a 50 per cent participation rate in Higher Education by 2010 (Chitty, 2009). The White Paper on Higher Education in 2003 reiterated this aim. Remarking that the "social class gap in entry to Higher Education remains unacceptably wide" (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, p. 8), it set out its aim of working towards granting "fair access" to Higher Education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. A further White Paper in 2006 (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) focused exclusively on widening participation among under-represented groups.

The measures set out in the 2003 and 2006 White Papers can be divided into measures targeted at changing the structures in the Higher Education system – in particular admissions procedures – and measures targeted at potential entrants. The latter included financial support for individuals from low-income families, most importantly the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and initiatives aimed at tackling young people's attitudes towards educational attainment and Higher Education. The 2006 document groups the government's efforts into four categories: Raising attainment, Raising aspirations, Improving applications and admissions, and Measuring performance (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Although it was already mentioned in the 2003 White Paper, the 2006 document seems to establish "raising aspiration" as a distinct strategy.

Although the "skills agenda" was less prominent in Scottish policy compared to English policy, the Scottish government embraced widening participation in post-compulsory education as an objective during the 2000s (Gallacher, 2006). In response to the Dearing Report and the Garrick Report, four Wider Regional Access Forums were established in 1999 and 2000 (Mullen, 2010). Originally established to improve access to Higher Education for under-represented groups, their remit was later widened to expanding participation in Further and Higher Education (ibid.).

The commitment to widening participation has been repeatedly set out as an objective in Scottish policy documents including the Lifelong Learning Strategy, published by the Scottish Executive in 2003 (Scottish Executive, 2003b), a strategy document for the development of Higher Education (Scottish Executive, 2003a) and the plan for funding provision by the Scottish Funding Councils (Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education, 2003). While these documents assert the need to widen participation in post-compulsory education among society as a whole, they particularly emphasise the need "to see real improvement in the proportions of students from the most economically disadvantaged groups" (Scottish Executive, 2003a, p. 4). In 2005, the Scottish Funding Council launched the strategy Learning for All, which aimed to provide the relevant stakeholders with a framework to implement widening access plans and set out measures to monitor the success of widening participation activities (Mullen, 2010).

The above-mentioned policies indicate that the Scottish approach of widening participation is not focused exclusively on Higher Education but on post-compulsory education more generally. This is also evident in the More Choices, More Chances strategy, launched in 2006, which seeks to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). One set of measures focuses on preventing young people from becoming NEET by raising expectations and educational achievement, and another set is aimed at engaging young people who are already NEET in education, employment or training (Scottish Executive, 2006). Besides activities aimed at engaging young people in learning, the strategy asserts

the need to include supporting young people through special services and providing financial incentives (Scottish Executive, 2006).

In the academic debate on widening participation policy, which tends to concentrate on the English context, two lines of critique have been frequently put forward: a focus on economic benefits and a tendency to target individuals rather than structures (Baxter et al., 2007). Regarding the former, it has been argued that widening participation policies are underpinned by an "utilitarian" rationale which stresses the economic benefits of widening participation for both the individual and the nation as a whole (Jones & Thomas, 2005) and "sidelines" the social justice rationale (Archer, 2007).

With reference to the latter, several authors have argued that widening participation policy is based on a "deficit model" which concentrates its efforts on changing the attitudes – and qualifications – of potential entrants rather than institutional structures and cultures (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2002; Gorard et al., 2006; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Watts & Bridges, 2006). Uniting both lines of criticism, Burke (2002) asserts:

> *Through the normalising technologies of formal education, 'non-standard' students are shaped into the 'good' citizens required for a strong British nation. Social exclusion is understood as a threat to the nation, weakening the labour market and 'our' competitive position against the rest of the world. (p. 27)*

While most academic analysis has identified individualising tendencies of widening participation policy, there are also authors who see a "deficit model" operating alongside structural reforms (Greenbank, 2006). There is a consensus that the debate on widening participation is contested and underpinned by several discourses (Archer, 2007; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Stevenson et al., 2010).

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, inequalities in participation remained stark. Recent data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) indicates that participation by young people from low-participation neighbourhoods

has only slightly increased over the last decade (Bolton, 2012). Alongside an increase in participation of people from working class backgrounds in Higher Education, a process of "horizontal stratification" has taken place, that is the unequal distribution of students over different forms of Higher Education, different institutions and different subjects (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009). People from working class backgrounds remain over-represented in Further Educational Colleges, the pre-1992 universities and vocational courses, while the most privileged groups make up the majority of students at highly selective universities and subjects (ibid.). Research by the Sutton Trust shows that although the participation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the "leading 13" universities has increased by 49 per cent between 1997/98 and 2002/03, the overall figures are still low given the baseline (The Sutton Trust, 2008).

While in Scotland overall participation in Higher Education has increased more than in England, inequalities in participation between the most disadvantaged and most privileged socio-economic groups have not changed substantially over the last decade. Figures on the destinations of school leavers from 2009/10 indicate that 15.5 per cent from the most deprived SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) decile go on to Higher Education compared with 60.6 per cent from the least deprived decile (Scottish Government, 2010b). The 2012 figures from the Scottish Funding Council (Scottish Funding Council, 2012a) also show large inequalities in participation with respect to different types of Higher Education institutions. While colleges have the highest proportion of students from the most deprived quintiles, this group makes up only a small proportion of students at "ancient" universities (where only 7 per cent of students are from the most deprived and 12 per cent from the second most deprived quintiles). The increase in participation among under-represented groups can be attributed to the increase in participation by people from disadvantaged backgrounds in new universities and Further Education colleges (Iannelli, Gamoran, & Paterson, 2011).

In recent government proposals, both by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in Westminster and the Scottish government, a shift in the debate on

Higher Education participation can be identified. The focus is no longer on widening overall participation in Higher Education, but on targeted measures to increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is increasingly discussed under the heading of promoting "fair access" (see, for example, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education, 2010).

In the English context, recent policy proposals include plans to reduce state funding for universities alongside a reduction in spending on widening participation interventions and abolishing general entitlements to financial support (such as the EMA). Instead, the current government seeks to attain more equal participation by obligating Higher Education institutions to spend a fixed percentage of their funding on attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is set out in Access Agreements and monitored on a regular basis (Office for Fair Access & Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012). Furthermore, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are sought to be attracted through financial support schemes, such as the National Scholarship Programme (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011).

Similar to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council will establish Outcome Agreements with each university from 2012/2013 onwards, which link funding to specific targets with respect to widening access (Scottish Funding Council, 2012b). Recent Scottish Higher Education policy seems to agree with the UK government in promoting efficiency rather than expansion (see Scottish Government, 2010a). The recent Green Paper on Higher Education published by the Scottish Government emphasises the need to further increase participation level of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, acknowledging that "there is still a long way to go in achieving equality of opportunity and outcome for people from different backgrounds" (ibid., p. 13). However, the document questions the effectiveness of allocating funds for widening access activities to universities and suggests a transfer of funding to early years education, assuming that "raising aspiration in school is the key to widening access"

(p. 14). This indicates that future activities to widen access to Higher Education might focus on raising attainment and aspiration at a younger age.

2.3 Public interventions to raise aspirations

In order to realise the aim of widening participation among under-represented groups, the Scottish Executive, as well as the Education Department in Westminster, launched a number of initiatives during the 2000s. Besides measures to reform the structure of the Higher Education system, a number of programmes targeted at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds prior to entering post-compulsory education were launched. These programmes typically combined two strategies: the first sought to prepare this group for participation in Higher Education, mainly through improving attainment; and the second aimed to change attitudes towards Higher Education. In particular the latter strategy was increasingly described as "raising aspirations". The major initiatives of raising aspiration in England and Scotland are discussed next.

In the English context, the 2003 White Paper highlights three measures aimed at raising aspirations toward Higher Education: The AimHigher initiative, the Education Maintenance Allowance and parts of the Gifted and Talented provision (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b). While the Education Maintenance Allowance is seen as an incentive designed to "encourage" young people to continue into post-compulsory education, AimHigher and Gifted and Talented are geared towards changing perceptions of Higher Education.

The AimHigher initiative emerged from the Excellence Challenge, which was part of Excellence in Cities, and Partnerships for Progression (Riddell, 2010). Implemented in 2004, AimHigher was designed to support local partnerships between schools, Further Education colleges and Higher Education institutions with the aim of improving attainment and raising aspirations of attending Higher and Further Education in disadvantaged areas (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). The AimHigher programme included a suite of outreach activities, such as

university visits, summer schools and mentoring and was complemented by a National Roadshow providing information about financial support and the benefits of Higher Education (ibid.).

Gifted and Talented also emerged from the Excellence in Cities initiative and was launched in 1999 to improve standards in schools in deprived urban areas. While Excellence in Cities was aimed at raising overall standards and improving "failing schools", the Gifted and Talented programme was aimed at identifying the 5-10 per cent most "able" pupils from each school with an aim to support and equip them for the top universities (Riddell, 2010). Although the programme was targeted at young people from all socio-economic backgrounds, it had a specific focus on supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). The 2006 White Paper on widening participation in Higher Education restated the importance of Gifted and Talented for widening access, announcing to provide further outreach activities, such as university visits and summer schools (ibid.).

Unlike in England, there has been no nationwide initiative in Scotland. Here, regional projects delivered through Widening Access Regional Forums and a number of individual universities and partnerships between universities and schools (Mullen, 2010). The four Regional Forums each comprise several programmes, aimed at widening access to Further Education and Higher Education for "under-represented groups" including young people at different ages and adults. They include activities such as campus visits, conferences and school-based activities accompanied by student mentors (see, for example, Focus West, 2012; South East Forum, 2009). In addition to the activities of the Wider Regional Access Forums, a number of local projects were initiated, including efforts to reform Higher Education admission and outreach projects aimed at tackling young people's aspirations (Universities Scotland, 2010).

Both the Scottish and English initiatives of raising aspiration can be seen as guided by the two-fold mission of preparing young people for Higher Education study and

incentivising them to participate in Higher Education. Examples for the former are activities aimed at developing study skills and attitudes such as confidence and motivation, delivered on campus or in schools. The latter is sought to be achieved by promoting a positive picture of Higher Education and providing information about the benefits of studying at university. Key strategies in all the initiatives are the provision of information, guidance and advice about Higher Education and "first hand" experiences through university visits, student mentors, and summer schools (see, for example, Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Focus West, 2012; North Forum for Widening Participation in Further and Higher Education, 2008; South East Forum, 2008). These strategies aim to make university an attractive, thinkable and "achievable" destination for young people (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

In addition to the initiatives outlined above, several projects with an explicit focus on raising aspiration were launched in the late 2000s in Scotland and England. In contrast with the initiatives outlined above, they were not specifically geared at encouraging young people to enter Higher Education, but attempted to raise aspirations towards educational and occupational achievement more broadly. In England, the Extra Mile project, launched in 2008, had the aim of raising aspirations and attainment in schools, an aim which was also pursued by the Schools of Ambition project in Scotland. Both projects tried to encourage schools to develop examples of "best practice".

The Schools of Ambition programme had the overall aim of "raising pupil ambition and achievements" (Scottish Government, 2010c). It included 52 schools from across the local authorities in Scotland which received additional funding for three years in order to implement their own "transformational plan" and were supposed to function as examples of good practice for other schools (Menter et al., 2010). The schools were free to set their own priorities which could include staff development, curriculum, introducing skills for learning, life and work, partnerships and pupil experience (Scottish Government, 2009). In their descriptions of areas of transformation, the majority of participating schools cite "raising aspiration",

"raising ambition", "confidence" and "motivation" among pupils as one of their prime aims (ibid.).

A similar focus can be found in the Extra Mile project which was conducted in schools in disadvantaged communities in England. It collected examples of "best practice" on improving educational outcomes and trialled these approaches in 20 schools. Thus, the project aimed to address "the cultural barrier of low aspirations" and close the "attainment gap" between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers (Department for Education, 2011). More specifically, it hoped to improve attitudinal characteristics including "confidence", "motivation, "morale" and "sense of deprivation" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

While the above-mentioned initiatives were directly aimed at young people, the Inspiring Communities programme, which was launched in 2009, targeted disadvantaged communities. Over the next year, 15 local communities in England developed and carried out their own, locally tailored projects (Communities and Local Government, 2011). The projects spanned from encouraging healthy living to mentoring programmes and initiatives with the aim to instil pride in the local area. The ultimate goal underpinning the projects was to improve educational attainment and aspirations of young people and thus "aid social mobility" (ibid., p. 4).

The present Conservative-Liberal Democrat government continues to stress the need to raise aspirations in order to tackle issues such as unequal educational outcomes and poverty (Cabinet Office, 2011; Department for Education, 2010; Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Education, 2011; HM Government, 2011). This seems to be mainly discussed in the context of the government's "social mobility strategy", which has been announced as by the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in 2011 (HM Government, 2011) and bundles a number of measures with the aim to improve educational outcomes for individuals over their "life-cycle".

In comparison with the Labour Government, however, large government-funded interventions to raise aspiration seem to have been abandoned by the present

government. One indicator for this is that funding for AimHigher and the Inspiring Communities programme was not extended. Instead, it is hoped that these programmes will be continued on a local basis, funded by charitable activity rather than government subsidies (Communities and Local Government, 2011; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010). The tendency to rely on local actors, including teachers, schools and communities to raise attainment and aspiration, also becomes evident in this statement from the 2010 Schools White Paper:

> *(…) local authorities will be able to use their wider position in local regeneration, employment and community development, and their knowledge of existing schools, to seek sponsors and partners who will fit with the character of the local community – and help raise aspirations. (Department for Education, 2010, p. 63)*

With respect to concrete efforts to raise aspirations for Higher Education and highly-qualified occupations, the present government sees schools responsible for offering "high quality, aspirational information, advice and guidance" (HM Government, 2011, p. 40). In addition to this, it is expected that voluntary actors adopt a role, which becomes manifest in the internship programme Inspiring the Future, launched by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2011. By seeking to recruit 100,000 "high profile inspirational speakers", the initiative is designed to equalise access to the Civil Service and other professional occupations, as well as to "broaden horizons" and "raise aspirations" among disadvantaged young people (Cabinet Office, 2011). This indicates a further shift towards responsibilising individual actors combined with a focus on partnerships between local actors (Wright, 2012).

The chapter has shown that social class inequalities with respect to educational attainment and participation have been an issue of debate in policy since the 1950s, when low levels of educational participation by working class children were first seen as a problem for economic prosperity and social justice. From the late 1990s, inequalities in participation in Higher Education came into focus again and found expression in widen participation policy. Policy solutions sought to reduce "barriers" faced by young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and

increasingly focused on attitudinal barriers which were addressed by initiatives tackling young people's aspirations. The academic debate on young people's educational attainment, transitions and aspirations, in many respects, mirrors the policy debate and both can be seen as influencing the other. The ways in which aspiration has been understood and investigated in research is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three sections. The first section discusses how young people's aspirations and decision making have been an issue for social research in the field of educational inequalities since the 1950s. It, firstly, discusses functionalist and cultural reproduction theories and, secondly, more recent approaches, influenced by modernisation theories and post-structuralist thought. The second section discusses literature on social inequalities in post-compulsory educational participation since the 1990s, distinguishing between a body of research investigating different types of "barriers" and a body of research which examines how young people's orientations towards post-compulsory education are shaped by their positions within multiple dimensions of social disadvantage. The third section of this review discusses recent literature with an explicit focus on aspiration in policy discourse; in practitioners' views and school practices; and among young people. Most of the literature discussed in the third section adopts a constructivist approach to researching aspiration. This builds towards identifying the gap in research and the research questions in this study.

3.1 The debate on educational inequalities – theoretical influences

As in the policy debate, the relationship between social class and educational attainment and participation has been an issue for social research since the 1950s. Within the debate, young people's choices and decisions to participate or not participate in post-compulsory education have gained attention by researchers. Two broad periods will be distinguished: the period between 1950 and the early 1970s, when functionalist and reproduction theories can be seen as dominating the debate on education inequalities, and the period from the 1970s onwards, when theories of cultural reproduction were influential alongside the modernisation theory and post-structuralist thought.

3.1.1 Functionalism and cultural reproduction theories in the 1950s - 1970s

A body of literature on the relevance of education for reproducing social structures emerged in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s (Silver, 1973). Influenced by structural functionalism, much of academic research concentrated on examining how the organisation of the education system produced unequal outcomes for different social groups, focussing in particular on questions of access to education (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). Researchers demonstrated that despite the guarantee of free secondary school education after 1944, the chances of working class children entering grammar schools, and thus having the opportunity to participate in Higher Education, were still much lower than for middle-class children (see, for example, Floud, Halsey & Martin, 1956). This unequal distribution was shown to be largely due to the selective school system rather than inferior levels of intelligence among working class children – an assumption which had so far been widespread (Silver, 1973).

At the end of the 1960s, the influence of family characteristics and home environment became a major concern in the research on educational inequalities (Silver, 1973). Kettley (2007) identifies a "functionalist" strand of research in the 1950s and 1960s which located the reasons for underrepresentation in working class values and culture. Working class orientations were described as collectivist and present-oriented and thus as having a detrimental effect on a child's educational success. "Educability research", a second strand of research identified by Kettley (ibid.), focused on examining the relationship between educational attainment and participation and a variety of background variables, mainly in the form of family characteristics, such as family size, parental attitudes and home facilities. This body of research was drawn upon in the Robbins Report on Higher Education in 1963, the first major policy document which called for widening participation in Higher Education (ibid.; see Section 2.2).

Although the structure of the education system remained an issue in the academic debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, sociologists of education became increasingly interested in examining how *educational knowledge* contributed to the reproduction of inequalities. Authors linked to this "new sociology of education"

investigated the ways in which educational content and the way it was mediated to the pupils was interactively constructed and how it was related to wider structures of power (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Silver, 1973). Two major protagonists of the theoretical developments of the new sociology of education were Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work focussed on the relevance of educational (and other social) practices (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). By focussing on processes mediating between structure and agency, these authors can be seen as distancing themselves both from structuralist functionalism, radical left theories and interactionist approaches.

It was during this time that young people's orientations towards education and their educational decisions became an issue of interest in the academic debate. Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Willis examined how cultural dimensions, including the actions and orientations of people are implicated in the reproduction of economic and social structures. In the educational field, Paul Willis' study, Learning to Labour (1977) was highly influential.

The starting point for Willis' (1977) study was not just the question of "how working class kids get working class jobs", but "why they let themselves" (p. 1), that is why they actively choose to labour instead of acquiring further educational qualifications. In Willis' view this question deserves attention because manual work leads to "inferior rewards", has an "undesirable social definition" and is "intrinsically meaningless" (p. 1). On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork following a group of working class "lads" in a Northern English secondary school, Willis identifies the adoption of working class culture through the "counter-school culture", as the crucial process which directs the young people towards manual work. By participating in the counter-school culture, which includes disengagement from academic work and rejection of authorities, the young people unconsciously prepare themselves for life on the shop floor. Culture is thus seen as mediating between economic conditions and individual orientations.

According to Willis (1977), the "lads'" orientation towards manual work and rejection of educational credentials is to some degree rational and reasonable as they unconsciously realise ("penetrate") that educational qualifications would not result in considerably better job opportunities or more meaningful jobs. The young people thus intuitively question the meritocratic myth of social mobility through education (pp. 127-128). Willis thus sees the young men's choices as shaped by learnt working class values – in particular a certain view of manual work – and an intuitive anticipation of the objective opportunities open to them.

In comparison with macro-sociological perspectives, Willis (1977) sees actors as actively involved in reproducing structures; their actions and choices are, to some extent, rational, but states that they are not arrived at through a conscious process of calculating costs and benefits. Willis thus argues that the decision of the "lads" to labour is the outcome of a process in which opportunities and circumstances find expression in a cultural form and are, therefore, actively and subjectively reproduced. Although this form leaves room for creativity, it is not to be understood as giving the individual limitless choice, but is "collective, if not consciously directed" (p. 120).

Willis' (1977) conceptualisation of social reproduction through subjective processes shares commonalities with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who has also been described as part of a neo-Marxist tradition. Both Willis and Bourdieu see subjective processes as led by internalised principles, shaped by "objective" past and present circumstances of an individual's social group. While for Willis "culture" was the main mechanism for the reproduction of inequality, Bourdieu developed the concept of "habitus" to refer to the link between subjective preferences and actions with objective possibilities and structural positions. The habitus can be described as "internalised structure" which becomes manifest in personal dispositions which "underlie our actions that in turn contribute to social structures" (Maton, 2008). The habitus links the past and the present, as it shapes the individual's actions and orientation through the embodied past experiences of the social group. Corresponding with this, Bourdieu asserted that educational decisions by young

people and their families were situated within "objective chances of social mobility" which brought about "subjective hopes (…) which are no more than objective chances intuitively perceived and gradually internalised" (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 111).

The importance of habitus with respect to educational processes leading to unequal outcomes is a central issue in Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron's (1990) work Reproduction. The authors argue that the make up of the education system, its procedures of selection and forms of knowledge, are not neutral but are pervaded by "rules" determined by the privileged classes in society. An important mechanism in the reproduction of inequality, identified by Bourdieu and Passeron, is that of self-exclusion by disadvantaged groups. This means that young people from this group decide not to participate in higher levels of education, even if they fulfil formal requirements. The authors thus argue that unequal outcomes are due to a combination of biased structures in the education system, as well as individual actions and orientations. Like Willis, Bourdieu and Passeron see social structures as reproduced through the intuitive action of individuals. However, Bourdieu and Passeron see education not only as a milieu for the reproduction of working class culture as Willis does, but regard educational processes as shaped by and reproducing power relations.

The outlined debates on educational inequalities between the 1950s and the 1980s can be found in variation from the 1990s onwards where two strands of research can be distinguished. In one strand, unequal outcomes are seen as a product of factors residing in the individual and their immediate environment, whereas the other examines the relevance of wider social structures and processes. In the latter, a turn towards conceptualising social structures as reproduced through individuals – in the form of cultural expressions and embodied orientations – can be identified. Within both perspectives, the orientation of individuals towards education is seen as an important issue for research.

3.1.2 Modernisation theories, cultural reproduction theory and post-structuralist thought since the 1990s

Modernisation theories influenced the debate on social inequality at the beginning of the 1990s. Beck's diagnosis that life trajectories are increasingly determined by individual "choice" rather than socio-economic backgrounds was particularly influential (Brannen & Nilsen, 2007). A number of authors have examined this thesis with respect to young people's educational trajectories and transitions (see, for example, Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Evans, 2003; Heath, Fuller, & Paton, 2008). Most of them come to the conclusion that young people's trajectories and decision making are an outcome of individual agency, but take place within constraints influenced by social positions, as well as institutional regimes and the political and economic climate. It is argued that the "choice biography" is largely the preserve of the highly educated elite (du Bois-Reymond, 1998), and that, underneath dominant individualist narratives, structures still shape young people's educational and occupational opportunities (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Evans, 2007).

Alongside Beck's work, rational choice theories have also influenced the research on educational inequalities. They assume that individuals make choices based on weighing costs and benefits. This assumption has been criticised from several angles. It has been pointed out that individuals cannot be seen as solely rational actors and that costs and benefits associated with certain decisions have more than an economic dimension (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Hatcher (1998) found that the rational choice model is accurate for middle-class young people but not so much for those from working-class backgrounds and concluded that educational trajectories are influenced by a "strong cultural element" (p. 20).

Authors working in the critical qualitative field have been influenced by post-Marxist theory from the 1970s, in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose work has received major attention in the UK since the 1970s (Grenfell & James, 1998). In particular, Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, habitus and field were taken up in order to explain the strong link between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes. Scholars have drawn on Bourdieu's work in order to

illuminate working class experiences of education (see, for example, Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2001, 2006; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009), young people's decision making at the end of compulsory education (see, for example, Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and the perception of post-compulsory educational routes, particularly Higher Education (see, for example, Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007; Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). The concepts offered by his cultural perspective on reproduction were widely seen as a way to overcome the dualism between structure and agency.

Over the last decade, the debate on inequalities in education has been influenced by post-structuralist thought, including feminism. This entailed that social class is no longer regarded as the primary dimension of social disadvantage. Instead, individuals are seen as positioned within multiple inequalities formed by intersections of social class, gender and ethnicity/race (Archer, 2003). This has often been seen as influencing young people's educational success, both through the young people's own orientations and through the way they are positioned by others. With the influence of post-structuralist thought, the influence of discourse on young people's subjectivities and positioning has also received attention.

3.2 Social inequalities and participation in post-compulsory education

Parallel with policy concerns, the under-representation of certain groups in Higher Education, in particular socio-economically disadvantaged young people, has received increased attention in research from the late 1990s. A broad distinction between two major strands of research can be made. Firstly, a body of research can be identified which seeks to identify different types of "barriers" preventing this group from entering and succeeding in Higher Education. Secondly, there is a strand of research which illuminates more closely how socio-economic disadvantage and young people's participation are related, focusing in particular on how young people's positions in multiple dimensions of disadvantage produce certain identities

and dispositions. In both lines of research, young people's orientations towards educational destinations and aspirations for the future more generally are of importance.

3.2.1 Barriers to (Higher) Education

While young people's perceptions of post-compulsory education have been researched for decades, it seems that this issue has received increased attention since the late 1990s, linked to a policy concern with widening participation (see Section 2.2). According to Kettley (2007) a new field of "widening participation research" has emerged, uniting different methodological and theoretical approaches and aims, one focus being young people's decision making regarding Higher Education.

Much of this research has concentrated on examining different types of "barriers" that prevent young people from entering Higher Education (Fuller & Paton, 2007; Gorard et al., 2006). Different classifications can be identified: Fuller & Paton (2007) argue that the distinction between "institutional barriers" (such as admission procedures and requirements), "situational barriers" (such as cost, time, accessibility) and "dispositional barriers" (such individual motivation and attitudes to learning) has become the most commonly used. Other authors distinguish between "attitudinal" and "practical" barriers, the latter including financial and other resources, as well as attainment (Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

In their review of the widening participation literature, Gorard et al. (2006) conclude that inequalities in Higher Education participation are influenced by background characteristics, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, religious background, disability, type of school attended, housing, parental education, and family structure. The authors assert that parents are a major influence on young people's decisions regarding Higher Education, with parents' social class having a major impact. While Gorard et al. (ibid.) highlight parental occupational class, Gayle, Berridge & David (2002) conclude that the parental educational qualification is crucial.

Several studies have further investigated in which way social class impacts on the decision of attending Higher Education. Financial reasons tend to be cited as the most influential factor. The cost of Higher Education is reported to be a major deterrent for young people from low-income families because of the prospect of accruing debt (Callender & Jackson, 2004; Connor, 2001; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Furthermore, it was found that young people decide to leave education because they wish to earn a wage (Connor, 2001; Gorard et al., 2006). Although acknowledging these findings, some authors have criticised that since the introduction of variable top-up fees research has focussed on financial barriers and rather than structures in the education system and society (Gorard et al., 2006; Kettley, 2007).

Forsyth & Furlong (2003), who conducted a study with young people in Scotland, come to the conclusion that attainment is the key factor in explaining underrepresentation of socially disadvantaged young people in Higher Education. However, the authors assert that financial, geographical and social barriers provide an additional hurdle. The young people's reluctance to take on debt, as well as the cost of leaving home or commuting and the need to finance their studies through part-time work, led to choosing less advanced or prestigious courses. These findings suggest that according to the classification mentioned above, these results suggest that "situational barriers" were most influential.

In addition to the financial barriers, Forsyth and Furlong (2003) and Furlong (2005) identify "cultural barriers" impacting on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds at each stage of the decision making process and continuing to affect their success and the likelihood of remaining in Higher Education. As one of these cultural barriers the authors identify a perception of following a path that is "atypical" of the communities these young people grew up in. Furthermore, the young people are reported to have expressed the expectation of not fitting in at university, and being regarded negatively by their more privileged peers. These barriers are reminiscent of the findings of other authors who do not use the label of "barriers" (see Section 3.2.2).

Since the 2000s, attitudinal barriers, including motivation, aspiration and similar dispositions, seem to have received increased attention in research. From the late 2000s, 'aspiration' has been regarded as a variable that mediates between social background characteristics and educational attainment and participation. Research on aspiration typically focuses on educational and career ambitions of young people, measured by the stage of educational qualification and type of occupation a young person hopes to achieve (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). Most research either examines the impact of the background characteristics of an individual, such as gender, socio-economic position and ethnicity, on type and level of aspiration or the influence of aspiration on educational attainment and participation.

In their review Determinants of Aspirations, Gutman and Akerman (2008) conclude: "girls, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds and higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to hold higher aspirations than their counterparts" (p. i). Research found that parental attitudes in particular mediate between socio-economic background and the aspirations of young people (Strand & Winston, 2008; Wentzel, 1998). However, aspirations are also seen to be influenced by attainment (Bond & Saunders, 1999) and attributes such as efficacy and self-belief, independently of background characteristics (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). The evidence on the impact of aspiration on attainment and participation in post-compulsory education seems to be less clear (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). A number of recent studies commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggest that impact is small, or that there is not enough evidence to suggest a causal relationship (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012; Gorard, Beng-Huat, & Davies, 2012; Todd et al., 2012). Several authors point out that young people's trajectories and decisions can be fully explained by other variables, attainment being crucial (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Gorard, 2010).

Besides doubts about the significance of evidence on aspiration, research on aspiration has been criticised for its normalising and individualising tendencies. Firstly, it has been asserted that defining aspiration as a wish to pursue post-16 education and/or participate in Higher Education neglects other types of aspiration,

normalises middle-class trajectories and excludes the possibility that young people from working class backgrounds might actively choose not to participate in Higher Education (Watts & Bridges, 2006). Secondly, it has been highlighted that a focus on attitudinal barriers, neglects wider structures and mechanisms of disadvantage (Jones & Thomas, 2005).

Similar criticisms have been made with respect to research on barriers to education more widely. It has been highlighted that the term 'barriers' imply a "deficit" in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gorard et al., 2006), excluding the possibility of choosing not to participate in Higher Education (Fuller & Paton, 2007) and ignoring the interrelatedness of different aspects, as well as the wider structural inequalities that underpin unequal access to Higher Education (Kettley, 2007). This critique is also mounted against dominant tendencies in widening participation policies, which have to be seen as interrelated with the research on barriers to Higher Education (see Section 2.2).

Most scholars who are critical of research that neglects the impact of structural inequalities can be described as adopting a qualitative-critical approach to researching educational inequalities. With different emphases, these authors examine how educational outcomes and participation are influenced by young people's positions in structures of inequality, by educational mechanisms and by their subjective perceptions of education and their educational decision making. These approaches and their main findings are discussed next.

3.2.2 Young people's positions in multiple dimensions of disadvantage

Like research on barriers to participation, other scholars have tried to answer the question of why so few young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds make the transition from school to university and even fewer enter the most prestigious forms and courses. A study on the Higher Education choices of young people from working class backgrounds by Ball, David and Reay (2005) found their Higher Education choices were constrained in several ways. Besides geographical restrictions, lack of qualifications and the financial cost, the authors

identified emotional constraints, which become manifest in the feeling of not "fitting in" with the culture and people at (certain types of) university. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, they argue that a tension between the "familial habitus" and "institutional habitus" (see also Reay, 1998) meant that the young people had an intuitive sense of their "place in the world", and saw university as not "for people like us" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 64-65).

Ball, David and Reay (2005) conclude that Higher Education participation tends to be perceived as an emotional as well as an economic risk by young people from working class backgrounds This finding has been confirmed by Archer and Hutchings (2000), who examined the discursive constructions of Higher Education among working class young people who did not participate in Higher Education. The authors assert that the young people in their study tended to associate Higher Education participation with a risk, because they thought the investment in terms of time and money might not result in success – either at university or on the labour market. Besides the perception of university posing an economic risk, the young people also associated university with a risk of becoming a different person which the authors identify as an identity risk (see also Archer & Leathwood, 2003).

In a study with working class young people not participating in Higher Education, Archer and Hutchings (2000) come to similar conclusions. The authors examined how the young people perceived "official" ideas on the value of Higher Education. They found that the young people echoed dominant discourses on the chance of becoming upwardly mobile by participating in Higher Education, in particular the girls in their sample. The young people linked university with better paid jobs and a way to avoid "crap" jobs that they associated with hard and dirty work. Among those young people who regarded university as attractive, the boys tended to see income as a benefit, while the girls tended to emphasise becoming a better person and to benefit their families. Despite reproducing "official" ideas on the objective value of Higher Education, the young people tended to construct "HE as inherently risky, demanding great investment and costs, and yielding uncertain returns" (p.

569). Moreover, the young people also doubted the "value" of Higher Education with respect to "personal identity benefits" (ibid.).

The relation between young people's identity constructions and their perception of Higher Education has been the focus of a number of studies. They have focused in particular on the relevance of classed notions of femininity and masculinity. Several authors emphasised the difficulties for young men to reconcile particular aspects of working class masculinity with the idea of academic success and participation in Higher Education (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Burke, 2007; Epstein, 1998; Reay, 2002). Archer and Leathwood (2003) and Archer, Hollingworth and Mendrick (2010) found that the boys in their studies associated post-16 education with femininity and "middle-classness", which was linked with notions of passiveness and immaturity, and mental work. The authors found that the boys saw work as the major means of acquiring working class manhood, as it provided the possibility of earning money. This was seen as desirable as it promised the chance to purchase "symbols of material success" (Archer & Leathwood, 2003, p. 181) and adopt the positions of a "responsible adult" and breadwinner (Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendrick, 2010; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Archer & Yamashita, 2003).

With respect to working class girls, Archer and Leathwood (2003) found a less strong rejection of university on the basis of identity constructions. In contrast with the male participants, they rejected university more often by referring to particular barriers and their unpleasant experience of education. Nevertheless, the authors detected a tendency to invest in constructions of working class femininity, associated with heterosexual relationships and sexual attractiveness, which some of the young people perceived as threatened by university participation. Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth (2007) found that the tendency of the girls in their study to invest in "glamorous working-class hetero-femininities" worked against their educational success in several ways. Firstly, because the girls invested large amounts of time in part-time jobs in order to be able to invest in their looks, and secondly because their commitment to heterosexual relationships led them to lower their aspirations and develop more stereotypical career plans.

Some authors moreover found a relationship between classed, gendered and ethnicised identity constructions, attachment to locality and educational aspirations. Connolly and Healy (2004a, 2004b), who compared working class with middle-class pupils in different areas in Belfast, found that the relationships and lived experiences of young people from middle-class areas were not tied to their local area, whereas young people from working class backgrounds developed a strong emotional and social attachment to the local area. However, they found different mechanisms operating according to gender. The working class boys' lives were limited to one area due to religious divisions. The idea of a hostile "other group" deterred them from leaving their local area and created a sense of belonging. Among the working class girls in their study, attachment to the local community was created through strong bonds among women in the local area. Similar to Connolly & Healy (2004a), Archer et al. (2007) found that the working class girls' heterosexual relationships led to an attachment to the local area and a wish to start a family instead of pursuing longer educational routes.

In addition to arguing that the young people's own constructions of working class femininity and masculinity countered educational attainment, Archer et al. (2010) stress the relevance of positions that young people are ascribed by teachers. The authors found that in the view of the teachers, working class boys and girls deviated from the notion of the "ideal", that is middle-class, pupil. Drawing on research with young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, Archer (2008) elaborates on this by identifying different types of pupil "success" constructed by young people, parents and education professionals, with each of these types being linked to different pupil groups. The author identifies an "ideal" subject position which is linked to being white, male and middle-class, an "other" position ascribed to female and Asian pupils and a "demonised" position linked to Black and working class pupils. Most groups of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds are thus constructed as "deviating", which leaves little room for these pupils to experience and perform legitimate forms of success.

The research by Archer et al. (2010) and Archer (2008) thus sees "the impossibility" of educational success by young people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds not (only) as an outcome of their dispositions and orientations, but as a product of discursively constructed subject positions which constrain the young people in adopting and performing the subject position of a successful pupil.

Following recent policy debates on unequal attainment and aspiration, researchers have become increasingly interested in examining the interplay between "official" discourse and the discursive constructions by young people, as well as education practitioners. This research is discussed next.

3.3 Constructions of 'aspiration' in policy discourse, educational practice and among young people

The following section reviews recent literature which is influenced by an increasingly vivid discourse on aspiration. Literature which concentrates on examining the construction of aspiration in the policy debate is discussed in the first part. The second part includes research which sets policy debates on aspiration in relation to practices in educational settings and the views of education professionals. Research which examines young people's aspirations, often with a view to setting the findings in relation to constructions and assumptions made in policy and by education professionals is discussed in the third part.

3.3.1 Policy discourses on 'aspiration' since 1997

Several authors have directed their attention to the policy debate on young people's aspirations. They assert that policy debates in the UK have increasingly ascribed inequalities in educational attainment and participation to a "lack of aspiration" or a "poverty of aspiration" among young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Archer et al., 2010; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2009). The policy debates have consequently set out the need for young people to achieve higher educationally and participate in Higher Education and thus realise occupational success and upward social mobility.

Some authors see the debate on aspiration as a central element of New Labour policies. Butler and Hamnett (2011), for example, argue that the notion of 'aspiration', which was adopted by the Labour Party in the run up to the election in 1997, remained a "core theme" in policy under Blair and Brown and continues to be a central element of policy discourse under the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat government (p. 2). Several authors regard the debate on aspiration as an expression of a wider policy trend which promotes the idea of a responsible, self-reliant and entrepreneurial citizen (Bradford & Hey, 2007; Brown, 2011; Raco, 2009).

Raco (2009) also places the debate on aspiration in the context of neo-liberal, individualising policy discourse. However, he regards 'aspiration' not only as a topic in the educational domain, but also as an idea that permeates all policy and is indicative of a fundamentally new type of relationship between state and citizens. The new "politics of aspiration", according to Raco, can be seen as a shift from an "expectational" model of citizenship, where the state acts as a provider and guarantees equal outcomes, to an "aspirational citizenship", where the state acts as a facilitator and individuals are responsible for realising good life outcomes. Other authors have made similar connections to wider shifts in the construction of citizenship. Cumbers, Helms and Keenan (2009) situate the debate on aspiration within the wider narrative on "rights/responsibilities" in which individual effort is seen as a prerequisite for being entitled to social services.

Other authors regard the debate on aspiration as an integral part of widening participation policies and concentrate on the debate on aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is little literature which examines how 'aspiration' is used in education policy texts. Brown (2011) is one exception. He undertakes an analysis of over twenty policy documents on widening participation in the UK, examining how 'aspiration' was defined and made relevant in the documents. In their book Urban Youth and Schooling, Archer et al. (2010) also take a closer look at policy, although they do not specify the number of documents examined.

Both Brown (2011) and Archer et al. (2010) identify that the policy texts present aspiration as a prerequisite for educational attainment and later life success. Brown argues further that policy discourses regard aspiration as an "emotional disposition" that motivates future attainment. Both Archer et al. and Brown point to the often unclear definition of aspiration, identifying that policy texts use the term 'aspiration' as a reflection of other attributes, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, information and knowledge, and motivation. According to Brown, hopes, dreams and plans all tend to be referred to as 'aspiration' in policy documents.

Brown (2011) argues that widening participation policy increasingly adopts a more invasive approach, detecting a shift from "enabling" young people "to realise their existing ambitions to intervening in the lives of those who are not deemed to be aspirational enough" (p. 14). Bradford & Hey (2007) see a pressure on schools and other educational institutions "to encourage their students to think of themselves as ambitious and aspirational subjects, in charge of their own futures" (p. 597). The authors argue that this can be seen as a way of generating "psychological capital", which has ambivalent consequences regarding class relations. While the focus on aspiration is aimed at middle-class voters, it also represents "a new twist on redistribution in the sense that the discursive tactics entailed seek to inscribe young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with confidence and resilience in the face of psychological and social pressures" (pp. 600-601).

Several authors who have discussed the wider implications of the discourse on aspiration emphasise its responsibilising, pathologising and individualising character. It has been argued that the discourse constructs young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient (Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2009) and that this is indicative of a wider tendency of pathologising the white working class (Cumbers, Helms, & Keenan, 2009; Francis & Hey, 2009). It has also been asserted that interventions to "raise aspiration" focus on individuals or families, which implies that disadvantaged groups are made responsible for educational and social outcomes that are in fact shaped by structural inequalities (Brown, 2011; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Sellar et al., 2009). Sellar et al. (2009), who analysed widening

participation policy both in the UK and Australia, point out that policy texts usually acknowledge that aspirations are socially shaped but nevertheless take the individual as a starting point for interventions.

The focus on aspiration is seen by most authors as indicative of a wider policy shift towards a different form of citizenship. Francis and Hey (2009) see the discourse on young people's "lack" of aspiration as an expression of a neo-liberal trend of imposing moral duties on individuals:

> *The pithy sign of 'aspiration' is, in the discursive context of neoliberalism and socio-economic inequality, overwhelmed by the moral charge of its reviled signified: that of the feckless, parasitic individual who has failed to grasp the opportunities open to them. (p. 226)*

In addition to these pathologising and responsibilising tendencies, authors have also stated that the debates on aspiration present middle-class lifestyles, values and disposition as the norm for all citizens to aspire to. Brown (2011) and Watts and Bridges (2006) point out that by presenting Higher Education and professional careers as desirable aims for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, middle-class educational and occupational trajectories become the norm, while other trajectories and lifestyles are devalued. In addition to promoting certain aims as more valuable, the debate neglects the idea that happiness and a good quality of life can be attained through routes other than Higher Education and professional careers. It has also been argued that the debate makes middle-class values and dispositions the "yardstick" (Raco, 2009), including competitiveness and individualism and social mobility.

Comparing the literature which examines debate on aspiration with the wider literature on policy since 1997, it can be suggested that the former "fits" with the latter as it shares a tendency to individualise problems of educational and social disadvantage, problematise the attitudes and behaviours of working class people and responsibilise individuals for their life outcomes. The analysis by Brown (2011), however, suggests that the discourse on aspiration is marked by a shift from providing opportunities to targeting the internal dispositions of young people. Moreover, the aspiration debate seems to be an increased move towards presenting

middle-class lifestyles and trajectories as desirable and exerting pressure on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to adopt these as their aims.

Overall, the review of the literature suggests that there is a need for a more extensive discourse analysis of policy debates on aspiration, which is undertaken in this thesis. As this thesis links the analysis of the policy debate on aspiration to school discourse and young people's accounts, the following section presents the findings by other authors who have undertaken similar studies.

3.3.2 Constructions of 'aspiration' by professionals and in school practices

This section reviews literature that examines discursive constructions around aspiration by professionals and educational practices aimed at "raising aspiration". Most of this literature contrasts the professionals' constructions with discursive tendencies in policy documents and provides a critique of the policy debate.

Three studies have been identified which examine the ways educational professionals talk about aspiration. The papers draw on data which was collected in schools and/or local authorities in which participation in Higher Education is below average and which are affected by high socio-economic disadvantage. Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2011) and Raphael Reed, Gates and Last (2007) examined how teaching staff and local authority employees constructed learners, families and communities, how they explained low achievement and how they imagined this to be tackled. While Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson focussed on primary schools in one local authority, Raphael Reed et al. undertook their research in four local authorities in England. Brown (2011) draws on interviews with twelve widening participation practitioners in different localities in London and the East Midlands, focussing on the way practitioners defined 'aspiration' and how they saw their role in "raising aspirations" among young people. The studies all linked the professionals' views to policy to different extents, although none adopted an explicit comparative approach.

Both Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) and Raphael Reed et al.'s (2007) research found that the accounts by education professionals share similarities with

current policy discourses in that they tend to draw on "deficit constructions" when describing young people and their families and communities. Both authors identify that practitioners tended to link "low aspirations" among young people with cultural characteristics of families and communities. Their interviewees characterised at least some of the parents as placing low value on education and having low expectations and aspirations for their children. Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson and Raphael Reed et al. also identify that professionals regarded "low aspirations" as a consequence of local norms and traditions, including the norm of leaving school early or having children at an early age.

Raphael Reed et al. (2007) identify two main constructions underlying the professionals' accounts: firstly, describing families and communities as "apathetic and complacent", and secondly, seeing pupils as "passive learners". This means that families were ascribed a lack of will to change their situation, low confidence, a lack of long-term thinking, and non-willingness to go beyond the local area. Some of these findings resonate with the observation by Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2011) who identify a tendency among professionals to describe the local communities as "inward looking" and "isolated". In contrast with Raphael Reed et al., Pimlott-Wilson & Holloway do not only identify cultural deficit constructions in the professionals' accounts. Instead, they found that the interviewees also link young people's low aspirations with structural explanations, including parents' poor status in the labour market, low levels of educational qualifications and difficult home circumstances.

While Raphael Reed et al. (2007) do not further contextualise their findings, Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2011) interpret their findings from a social class perspective. They argue that professionals construct the parents as part of a deficient white working class. Moreover they argue that even though their interviewees acknowledged structural reasons for low achievement, this did not lead to appreciating "alternative forms of working class capital" (p. 86). Instead, "middle-class" knowledge and strategies were presented as valuable. The authors exemplify this by pointing to the professionals' tendency to define Higher Education and

occupational success as "high aspiration", while parents' aspirations for their children to be "happy" and "secure" were classified as "low" (p. 84). The authors go on to argue that this mirrors wider neo-liberal policy trends which "are not neutral but in reality reflect middle-class practices" (p. 90).

Examining the definitions of 'aspiration' made by the widening participation practitioners, Brown (2011) makes a similar argument. Although he found that the practitioners constructed a more "holistic" notion of aspiration than policy documents, both share a tendency to promote "developing future self-reliant citizens" (p. 14).

In addition to analysing interpretations by education professionals, Brown (2011) and Holloway & Pimlott Wilson (2011) examined the practices of raising aspiration in which these professionals engaged. In their analysis of the schools' "aspiration agenda", Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson identify two key strategies by which the schools sought to "reshape" pupils' aspirations. The first seeks to compensate the young people's deficit of knowledge, skills and attitudes by providing them with role models and by offering "enrichment activities", which aim to provide the children with activities otherwise not available to them (p. 89). The authors argue that these activities are "anti-local" in that they encourage young people to direct their view beyond the context of their families and neighbourhoods (p. 88). This resonates with the practitioners' views reported by Brown, who favoured activities which provided "time and space away from the people and places that served to depress their ambitions" (p. 14). The second strategy adopted in the schools studied by Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson is to encourage parents to ensure that they nurture their children's achievement and development of appropriate aspirations. The authors conclude that the schools adopted a dual strategy of calling on the duty of parents and of impacting on children's aspiration directly.

While the studies discussed above examine measures to raise aspirations from the point of view of practitioners, Slack (2003) researched a widening participation initiative that was conducted over a period of five years in a secondary school in

England. The initiative had the purpose of encouraging young people to "aim high" and included cultural activities, as well as talks by people who had "achieved" in life. The pupils interviewed by Slack perceived the activities as imposed and uninteresting and criticised the fact that high attaining pupils were preferably selected for the activities. The author interprets the programme as an expression of the teachers' middle-class preferences and as not relating to the pupils' habitus. She concludes that the programme perpetuated inequalities rather than encouraged the pupils as it created a sense of exclusion, especially to those young people who were not selected for certain activities and therefore saw their lack of ability confirmed once more.

3.3.3 Young people's aspirations and underlying discourses

This section discusses recent research on the types of aspirations among young people and the underlying discursive constructions. In the studies reviewed, 'aspirations' are understood as young people's plans, hopes for and orientation towards the future. The studies vary with respect to the type of aspirations they focus on: some studies concentrate on occupational and/or educational aims, while others examine young people's life aims more broadly. Almost all of the studies focus on young people who are from socio-economically disadvantaged family backgrounds or attend schools in deprived localities. All of the studies make an explicit link to the recent policy debate on aspirations and contextualise the young people's views within the debate. The section discusses the research findings and considers the variation in methodological, theoretical approaches, research agendas and the normative evaluation of the findings.

The most extensive qualitative evidence on young people's aspirations in recent years can be found in Archer et al.'s book Urban Youth and Schooling (2010). In the section on "aspirations", the authors draw on longitudinal data with 53 young people in their final years of compulsory schooling (14-16 years old) in six schools in different geographical areas in London. The authors identify the types of occupational aspirations young people mention, their change over time, and the underlying "motivational discourses".

In addition to this, two large studies which mainly draw on quantitative data could be identified. Sinclair, McKendrick and Scott (2010) examined the educational and occupational aspirations of 307 young people by conducting a survey in two schools in a socially deprived area in Glasgow. Kintrea, St Clair and Houston (2011) undertook a mixed method study exploring educational and occupational aspirations of young people at the ages of 13 and 15 in three schools in three different cities in the UK (London, Nottingham and Glasgow). The two English schools in Kintrea et al.'s study drew their pupils from deprived neighbourhoods, while the catchment area in the school in Glasgow was socio-economically "diverse". Both studies provide evidence which challenges public claims that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lack aspiration.

A number of studies reject the idea that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lack (appropriate) aspirations, which the authors see purported in public debates. Sinclair et al. (2010) and Kintrea et al. (2011) found that the large majority of young people in their samples had concrete occupational aims and stated the wish to participate in post-compulsory education and/or employment. While Archer et al.'s (2010) study also found that the young people had aims for the future, it also identifies a tendency among the young people to defer their decisions to a later point in their school career. Several studies moreover report that the plans mentioned by young people can be described as "realistic" in the sense that they were aware that they would most likely not become a successful sportsperson or film star (Brown, 2011; Kintrea et al., 2011; Sinclair et al., 2010). Kintrea et al.'s study shows that aspirations became more realistic between the ages of 13 and 15 (see also Furlong & Biggart, 1999).

The cited studies also reject the idea that the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be described as "low", although they make this claim on the basis of different types of data and different findings. Both Kintrea et al. (2011) and Sinclair et al. (2010) argue that the majority of young people in their studies held "high aspirations", drawing on evidence that a majority of pupils indicated a wish to attend Higher or Further Education, and pursue occupational

positions of high standing. While more than 70 per cent of the young people indicated aiming for "professional" and "associate professional and technical" occupations in Kintrea et al.'s study, there were just under 50 per cent in Sinclair et al.'s study indicating the same. Sinclair et al. found that a small group of young people favoured direct entry into the labour market and had lower "ambitions and expectations for employment" (p. 16). The authors conclude that this should not be seen as a lack of aspiration as the young people were willing to work and did not expect to be dependent on welfare.

In Archer et al.'s (2010) study a much lower percentage of young people indicated the intention to pursue high status occupations. The study found that 30 per cent of young people mentioned the aspiration of a professional occupation at some point in their study, and less did so towards the end. Based on the finding that the majority of young people said that they aimed for skilled occupations, the authors argue that the young people had "responsible", "respectable" aspirations. Their evaluation agrees with Sinclair et al. (2010) and Kintrea et al. (2011) in rejecting the assumption that these young people lack aspiration. However, while Kintrea et al.'s and Sinclair et al.'s evaluation adopt the logic of "high" versus "low" aspiration, Archer et al. are more critical of quantifying levels of aspiration.

The different findings in Archer et al.'s (2010), Sinclair et al.'s (2010) and Kintrea et al.'s (2011) research might be due to the different contexts as well as to the nature of the research. Archer et al.'s (2010) study, which was based on in-depth, longitudinal qualitative research, gives a more nuanced insight into how young people's plans develop and what they regard as realisable at different stages. The studies by Kintrea et al. and Sinclair et al. arguably give a less differentiated picture as the researchers did not get insights into the young people's everyday lives and the development of their aspirations over time. Their survey approach presumably led to a higher number of young people indicating a wish to participate in Higher Education and perform high status occupations. Reflecting on the study by Kintrea et al., St Clair and Benjamin (2011) highlight the "performative" character of aspiration, asserting

that responses by research participants are also a product of the context of the research setting.

Despite their assertion that young people held "high aspirations", Kintrea et al. (2011) and Sinclair et al. (2010) found some evidence of a discrepancy between young people's "ideal" and their "expected"/"realistic" occupations. Kintrea et al. conclude that "realistic aspirations" may "reflect perceived individual and structural constraints" (p. 14). Furthermore, several authors observed that the young people lowered their aspirations over time, which mainly meant that the young people abandoned aspirations for professional occupations. Brown (2011) links this to the young people's expectations of their grades and their awareness of barriers to professions, whereas Archer et al. (2010) argue that this was indicative of an unconscious process in which the young people increasingly learnt "their (gendered, classed, racialised) place" (p. 85), feeling that middle-class destinations were "too risky, unattainable and/or undesirable" (ibid.).

Most studies which examine the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds make assumptions about the relationship between *types* of occupational aims and background characteristics such as social class and gender. Several studies found that their participants mentioned the wish to pursue career and educational aims which were linked to concrete occupations. Sinclair et al. (2010) and Kintrea et al. (2011) assert that most of the occupations young people aimed for fell into the categories of professional or associate professional occupations. The authors conclude that the young people can be seen as aspiring to "specific" and "vocational" jobs, "highly visible to the general public" (Sinclair et al., 2010, p. 14).

Several authors found that occupational aims differed related to gender. Archer et al. (2010) found that the girls in their study tended to aim for caring professions, occupations in the beauty sector or artistic occupations whereas the boys tended to favour (skilled) manual work. The authors interpret these findings as indicative of gendered working class destinations. This mirrors earlier findings by Furlong & Biggart (1999) in the Scottish context and Kintrea et al. (2011). In the latter study, a

high number of girls associated themselves with "personal services" and "sales and customer service", while a great proportion of the boys named "skilled trades" as "realistic aspirations".

While the research discussed above concentrates on the occupational and educational aims of young people, there are a few studies which examined the wider aims young people held for life, as well as the motivations that underpin young people's aim for the future. Two sources seem particularly relevant. The first is a paper by Brown (2011), based on the findings from a study with 34 working class 14 year olds at four state secondary schools in south-east London, which asked the young people what they would hope to achieve at different stages and what success meant to them personally. The second source is Archer et al.'s (2010) study which identifies "motivating discourses" underpinning the aspirations of the young people. Watts and Bridges' (2006) paper, based on a study with 15 young people in the East of England, has a more specific focus – asking young working class people retrospectively for their reasons for not participating in Higher Education – but similar to the other authors makes assumptions on the broader life aims of this group.

While Brown (2011) found that having an enjoyable job was most frequently cited as a desirable aim, Archer et al. (2010) identified this as a minority position among the high attaining young people. Kintrea et al. (2011) who examined the motivations young people gave for their occupational plans, also found that performing an activity they like was mentioned most frequently, followed by an interest in caring for other people or animals and material rewards such as money and fame.

Brown's study (2011) comes to the conclusion that the young people held "holistic" aspirations, meaning that their aims for the future encompassed all aspects of life. He found that young people's priorities in life revolved around the aims of happiness and security. This finding resonates with the "motivating discourses" of "being happy" and "staying safe" identified by Archer et al. (2010). Both authors derive these themes from the young people's prioritisation of maintaining relationships

(providing emotional security and happiness), their wish to perform a job that is fulfilling or enjoyable, and their desire for financial security. In Archer et al.'s study "safety" moreover had a physical dimension in that staying away from dangerous lifestyles, such as crime, drug use etc. was a priority for some young people. Brown's study furthermore identified the aim of gaining material wealth, which was mainly mentioned by male participants, and the wish to earn "enough", which was predominantly mentioned by the female participants. Brown interprets the boys' aspiration to wealth as an expression of adopting the role of the male provider.

Archer et al. (2010) make the observation that the discourses young people mention can create tensions with certain occupational educational destinations, in particular higher level careers and educational destinations. The authors highlight that the wish to take up a fulfilling job, for example, tended to contrast with the desire to stay safe. Instead, the desire for safety was found by working in supermarkets or at fast food chains, which were seen as the "epitome of a 'bad' job" (p. 91), but at the same time allowed the young people to stay locally and promised stable employment and pay. Archer et al. identify a further tension between the wish for "escape" and that of "staying put/staying close". While some young people wish to be socially and geographically mobile, most participants stated their wish to stay locally or were ambivalent. In some instances, the wishes to be socially mobile yet stay geographically close caused tensions. This finding resonates with other studies which have identified that progression to Higher Education can be perceived a threat to staying locally and maintaining relationships (see, for example, Christie, 2007; Raphael Reed et al., 2007).

Both Brown (2011) and Archer (2010) come to the conclusion that by prioritising happiness and security over career achievements and material wealth, the young people's accounts contrast with policy discourses on aspiration, which seem to promote these as desirable aims. Brown argues that while dominant discourse seems to present Higher Education and professional careers as the only pathway to happiness, the young people in his study envisaged other routes to reaching this state.

This resonates with the conclusion by Watts & Bridges (2006). The authors found that the lifestyles the young people aspired to revolved around gaining self-respect, proving their competence and being (financially) independent (which again was associated with being able to enter the property market or start a family) – aims which for them were attainable through leaving school and starting to work. The authors argue that the young people's life aims did not converge with the "valued ways of 'doing' or 'being'" (p. 272) associated with Higher Education by dominant political discourse and that, moreover, the young people did not see Higher Education as the only way to achieve their aims. Indeed, for these young people Higher Education could actually inhibit realising their aims. Watts (2006). concludes: "The commodity that is a higher education qualification is not, therefore, something that would necessarily enable them greater freedom to pursue the lives and lifestyles they valued and had reason to value" (p. 180).

The normative implications resulting from the disparity between the young people's life aims and the aims promoted by policy discourses vary. Archer et al. (2010) and Brown (2011) make a more general point by suggesting that it might not be desirable for all working young people to adopt the aims promoted by policy. Archer et al. wonder if policy efforts to encourage young people to participate in post-compulsory education can be seen as "coercion" rather than choice.

Watts & Bridges (2006) identify a dilemma between acknowledging the choices of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds not to participate in Higher Education and the understanding that their choices are restricted and shaped by structural inequalities which need to be addressed. Drawing on the "capability approach" by Amartya Sen, Watts and Bridges suggest a dual strategy of providing young people with more (financial and cultural) resources, recognising their personal values and preferences in the present situation (see also Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sellar et al., 2009).

All the research reviewed in this section dismisses the idea of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds holding low aspirations. However, the cited studies

illuminate young people's views on their futures in different ways. Investigating level and type of aspirations, recent research comes to the conclusion that young people overwhelmingly express their intention of pursuing Further and Higher Education and high status jobs. Other studies, which examine the discourses and motivations underlying the young people's constructions, detect a tendency among young people to prioritise different values, life aims and routes to realising these aims than those suggested by policy. For some authors, this raises the question of whether policy strategies of "raising aspiration" are to be seen as means of exerting oppression and coercion rather than choice and social justice.

3.3.4 Chapter summary and gap in research

The literature review has demonstrated that social class inequalities in education have been topical in UK sociology since the 1950s. Influenced by functionalist theory, research in the 1950s and 1960s located the reasons for unequal participation in the structures of the education system, as well as in the family characteristics of young people from working class backgrounds. Among these characteristics, negative attitudes rooted in working class culture were identified as a crucial factor that impacted detrimentally on educational success. From the 1970s, under influence of Marxist theories, a body of research emerged which examined the importance of culture in reproducing educational and wider inequalities. It regarded the orientation by working class young people towards shorter educational routes as an expression of their intuitive understanding of their objective chances and as a part of a process of adopting class culture.

These ways of conceptualising inequalities resonate in the contemporary debates. Interrelated with the policy agenda on widening participation in the 1990s, research has focused on explaining persistently unequal levels of participation in post-compulsory education. One strand of research has examined "barriers" to participation in Higher Education, highlighting that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face "financial", "situational", "cultural" and "attitudinal"/"dispositional" barriers. Attitudinal barriers in particular received

attention in the 2000s, which were increasingly debated under the heading of 'aspiration'.

A second strand of research, adopting critical-qualitative perspectives, has criticised this type of research from a theoretical as well as normative perspective, indicating that it individualises causes and neglects the importance of wider structures of disadvantage. Under the influence of post-structuralist thought, authors working in this tradition have highlighted that specific constellations of classed, gendered and ethnicised identity positions work against educational success and disadvantage. Certain types of working class masculinities have been found to be linked to a preference for work, linked to the role of the breadwinner and perceptions of Higher Education as feminine. Working class girls have been described as investing in forms of femininity, which resulted in prioritising family and relationships over pursuing longer educational routes. An attachment to place – often interrelated with identity issues – was also found as an impact on working class young people's tendency to pursue lower levels of education.

Authors working in this tradition have also pointed out that identity positions are to be understood as discursively constructed and negotiated rather than fixed dispositions in the individual. They have therefore examined how constructions of educational success are linked to dimensions of race, class and gender and how they position pupils. Young people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds have been found to be positioned as deviant from the "ideal" pupil and thus been granted limited possibilities to experience and perform success. Other studies examined young people's perception of post-compulsory education as a process of negotiating "official" discourse with their identity positions. They found that although young people adopted dominant ideas on the "objective" value of education, they tended to perceive it as risky – both in terms of uncertain returns and in terms of a threat to their identity.

Recently, research has turned towards examining the debate on aspiration in policy, as well as its relation with constructions among education practitioners and young

people's thinking about their futures. With respect to the policy debate, most scholars agree that it tends to construct young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their families as deficient, locating the problem of aspiration in working class culture. By identifying the need to raise young people's aspirations, the policy debate tends to normalise high academic achievement and professional occupations as desirable and thus has a tendency to impose middle-class lifestyles, values and strategies. Research which has examined the constructions of professionals working in education and widening participation initiatives has found that despite tendency to express some more holistic definitions of 'aspiration', they largely concur with policy in constructing high academic and occupational achievements as desirable and in drawing on the model of cultural deficiency in working class families to explain unequal educational outcomes.

Studies which examined young people's hopes and plans for their futures concur in the assumption that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not lack aspiration. Two large recent studies found that a majority of these young people hold high aspirations in the sense that they described professional occupations as well as Further and Higher Education as desirable aims for themselves. Other authors, who have examined the young people's aims for the future and their underlying motivations more carefully, come to the conclusion that instead of lacking aspirations, the young people present *types* of aims as desirable which differ from those promoted in policy or envisage different routes. These authors found that the young people's major aims include happiness, performing enjoyable activities, and, to some extent, earning money and are underpinned by the wish for emotional and financial safety and security.

Although recent research has increasingly recognised the need to examine the relationship between official discourses on educational inequalities, including the more specific debate on aspiration, educational practice and young people's views, there is no study which systematically compares the three. Research has so far concentrated on examining either one sphere, for example the policy debate or young people's views. Moreover, although some research links different spheres,

there is no study which compares the three by systematically adopting a discourse perspective.

The literature which focuses on the aspiration discourse is mainly concerned with examining accounts by young people and professionals. Little attention is paid to how the ideas presented in "official" discourses are put into practice in educational settings and conveyed to the pupils. There is, therefore, a need for more extensive qualitative research which investigates educational contexts as a link between "official" discourse and young people's orientations. It is assumed in this study that educational settings might convey policy discourse to young people, but might also transform and resist policy ideas.

While the literature mainly highlights the disparities between official ideas on aspiration and young people's ways of imagining their futures, there is little evidence on how official discourse, which young people encounter in institutional contexts, such as the school, impacts on young people's thinking about their futures after leaving school. It is therefore an aim of this thesis to trace how official discourse is salient in young people's thinking about their futures. Moreover, the research aims to examine how the young people negotiate official ideas with possibly competing ideas they encounter in other contexts and how both might be reconciled.

It is assumed that the approach taken in this study shifts the focus from the individual young people towards discourse. This study thus differs from research which considers individuals as the unit of sense making faced by internal and external barriers. Although it is close to studies which examine young people's aspirations as shaped by their positions in structures of disadvantage, it concentrates on patterns underlying their constructions. The study therefore has the potential to see young people's aspirations not as stable dispositions, but as influenced by ideas from different spheres. This also opens up the view for assessing how powerful official discourses are and enables conclusions on how official discourses shape the understanding and reproduction of inequalities to be drawn.

Finally, there is no research so far which examines aspiration debates in the Scottish context. This also provides a challenge for this research, because existing literature mainly focuses on the English context. Also, as education policy is devolved, many of the documents which have been examined by other authors do not apply to Scotland. However, it is assumed that education policy made in Westminster does shape everyday discourse in Scotland, as it is the dominant discourse in the national media. This thesis, therefore, takes both the UK/English and Scottish policy into account and aims to add to debates in both contexts.

Chapter 4: Theoretical background and framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of this study and describes the theoretical framework that was developed for undertaking the empirical research. The chapter reflects the process of conceptualising the study. I began by considering the debate on aspiration as a discourse which influences practices and subjectivity.

This led to drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, which will be described in the first section. As it is assumed that discourse cannot be understood without looking at power and subjectivity, these concepts are also discussed here. It was soon realised that Foucault's concepts provided a broad understanding but had limitations, particularly regarding their application to a study which examined empirically the effects of discourse in everyday contexts. The second section therefore presents limitations as well as frequently cited criticisms of Foucault's thinking. The third section reflects the attempt to complement Foucault's concepts with ideas on how they can be applied to studying discourse in context. Since the development of theory in this area seems to be in the early stages, it this section draws mainly on empirical studies which have attempted to work with Foucault's concepts.

4.1 Michel Foucault and the concept of discourse

This section explains Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, power and subjectivity and shows why they these concepts were regarded as useful in the underpinning of this study. The first part of the section clarifies Foucault's notion of discourse with emphasis on its "praxis" dimension. In the second part of this section, Foucault's understanding of power and subjectivity and their relationship with discourse will be discussed. Throughout the section, it will be demonstrated how Foucault's ideas are drawn on to provide theoretical lenses for this study.

4.1.1 Foucault's notion of discourse

Foucault speaks about discourse most explicitly in his early works, especially the Archaeology of Knowledge (2002), which is regarded by many as highly influenced by structuralist thought (Downing, 2008)[1]. These earlier works try to uncover "orders of knowledge", that is systematic constellations of thought with regard to a certain discipline and at a specific point in history. Over time, his works increasingly shifted from concerns with the inner structure of constellations of knowledge towards the social practices and power constellations which are embodied (and exerted) in discursive formations (Hall, 1997). These shifts in Foucault's object of study and his methods make it difficult to pin down his notion of discourse. In this thesis, the different foci of Foucault's work are seen as useful in informing the different stages of the research.

Michel Foucault's notion of discourse is best captured in this quote from the Archaeology of Knowledge (2002). Here he describes discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 54). This quote highlights the understanding of discourse as a practice and points out two further features: its tendency to bring about regularity and its constitutive nature. These characteristics will be explained next by contrasting them with other notions of discourse.

In the Archaeology of Knowledge (2002), Foucault gives the most explicit clues to the characteristics of discourse. He points to its systematic nature by describing it as composed of a number of statements. Distancing himself from linguistic approaches to discourse, he describes statements as neither "entirely linguistic nor exclusively material" (Foucault, 2002, p. 97). According to Foucault, language can be seen as the medium that contains and constructs statements, but it is not enough to constitute it (ibid.). As a statement is further characterised by combining structure and content, it is composed of a constellation of signs which together provide meaning, or in Foucault's words "a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not

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[1] Foucault himself rejected the idea that his concepts were "structuralist" (see Downing, 2008).

they 'make sense'" (Foucault, 2002, p. 97). Statements can thus be regarded as a systematic constellation of signs that can be read by humans.

Foucault regarded discourse, the larger entity above the statement, as a constellation of statements, but one that is moreover governed by "rules of formation", which define the specific relation of the units and therefore determine its uniqueness (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Discourse can be described as the relationship between "rules" and "statements" (ibid: 42). Foucault himself acknowledged that his use of the term 'discourse' varied,

> *(…) treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements. (Foucault, 2002, p. 90)*

The quote suggests that his emphasis shifted between the structural and content aspects of discourse. Following on from this, Mills (2004) points out that it is necessary to distinguish between discourse "as whole", including a set of procedures for the production of particular discourse, and particular discourses as groups of statements. This is seen as a useful distinction for this study which looks at the features of a particular discourse as a group of statements, rather than focussing on the "rules of formation". Rather than concentrating on how the discourse on aspiration are made possible through certain rules, the thesis examines the statements of a particular discourse and how these are appropriated in praxis.

Although Foucault ascribed discourses a systematic character, he asserted that discourses are not merely to be seen as "groups of signs" but as "practices" (Foucault, 2002, p. 90) 54).[2] Although the previous quote suggests that Foucault saw discourse and practice as the same, he did distinguish between the two. According to Foucault, discourse was to be realised through practice, and (almost all) social

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[2] Over the course of his working life, Foucault sometimes used the terms 'discourse' and 'practice' interchangeably, and sometimes distinguished between them. Discourse seems to be more important in Foucault's earlier writings, which were interested in the orders/systems of thought and knowledge (see, for example, The Order of Things, 1989 and The Archaeology of Knowledge, 2002). In the middle and later stages of his writings, by contrast, Foucault analysed how knowledge is created and manifested through historically specific institutional arrangements and practices (Hall, 1997).

practice as informed by discourse. It has been argued that discourse is not to be seen as existing in pre-given rules, but only by being employed in practice (Diaz-Bone et al., 2007) and constantly transformed (Foucault, 2002). This understanding of discourse is compelling for a project that aims to look at how discourse is enacted in everyday contexts.

By asserting that discourse systematically structures meaning, Foucault highlighted its relevance in producing social reality. He thus goes beyond a mere formalistic understanding of discourse. In the words of Hall (1997), discourse "constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" (p. 44). Although there might be "objects" independent from discourse, it is only through discourse that we come to understand them (Parker, 1990) (see also Section 4.2.1). This process of making objects knowable is captured by Foucault's concept of "problematisation" which he describes as a

> *(…) set of discursive or non-discursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.). (Foucault, [1984] 1989, p. 296)*

This suggests that problematisation is a process within discourse in which an object is ascribed meaning. "Problematisations" can thus be seen as a methodological device that allows analysing how discursive objects are constituted (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

The understanding of a discourse can be summarised by Carabine's (2001) definition of discourses as "historically variable ways of speaking, writing and talking about, as well as practices, around an issue" which have "identifiable effects which specify what is morally, socially and legally un/acceptable at any given moment in a culture" (p. 274). This notion of discourse opens up the analysis of effects of discourse as it is attempted in this study.

To fully understand the productive role of discourse in the production of social reality, discourse has to be seen in relation to Foucault's notions of truth, power and

knowledge (Hall, 1997; Mills, 2004). The next section illuminates the connection between the four concepts.

4.1.2 Discourse and its relation to truth, power, and subjectivity

The assumption that discourse shapes the social suggests that for Foucault discourse is closely related to power. According to Mills (2004), discourses have "institutional force", as they are "validated by some form of authority". They can thus be seen as producing *legitimate* ways of thinking and acting. Consequently, discourses are implicated in the production of socially specific "truths":

> *Each society has its regime of truth (…) that is the types of discourses it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned. (Foucault, 1979, p. 46)*

This quote suggests that discourses are shaped by "regimes of truth" and constitute instruments ("mechanisms and instances") with which societies generate true and false statements. Following on from the assumption that certain discourses adopt legitimacy and others are sanctioned, the connection between discourse and power is indicated.

For Foucault, power is characterised as productive as well as restrictive and works in a circulatory rather than top-down manner.

> *[Power] doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but (…) it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse, It needs to be though of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body. (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 119)*

This notion of power is in contrast with many other theories which see power as a good, possessed by individuals or groups and as a repressive force exerted top-down (Oksala, 2007)[3]. Discourse can be regarded as an "instrument" through which power is diffused, but it is more than just a medium:

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[3] This can be seen as a rejection of both Marxist and liberal conceptualisations, which dominated the philosophical though in the 1970s (Oksala, 2007).

(…) a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1979, p. 101)

In this quote, Foucault mentions the many functions discourse can adopt in relation to power. Instead of merely reproducing power, he sees discourse as a medium that can be used to destabilise, resist or counter power. This links in with his assumption that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 95), that is that power is intricately linked to resistance. It can be concluded that, for Foucault, discourse exerts power and resistance and can be the product of either.

Moreover, even though discourses can acquire dominance they still contain a number of co-existing ideas:

(…) we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (Foucault, 1979, p. 100)

This variety of discursive elements can be understood as being in a constant struggle for dominance. It was one of the concerns of Foucault's concept of Genealogy to bring "subjugated" knowledge to the light, which he understood as a "naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required levels of cognition and scientificity." (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 82). By looking at the discourse on aspiration in different contexts, and thus shed light on possible competing ideas, this thesis aims to illuminate the struggle for dominance and identify "subjugated" discourses.

Although much of Foucault's work appears to be concerned with the analysis of power, Foucault stated in a late interview, that "it is not power, but the subject which is the general theme of my research" (Foucault, 1982a). Indeed, his later works seem to concentrate more on the formation of subjectivity.

According to Foucault, the formation of an individual's self-understanding is to be seen as a process influenced by social forces linked to power. He illustrates this by asserting that the term "subject" has two meanings in that an individual is both "subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 1982b, p. 781). This suggests that the individual is subject to power that is both exercised from outside and by the individual itself. Given that power is mediated through discourse, discourses can be seen as mediating between power and subjects. As Weedon (1987) points out: "power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects" (p. 113).

Foucault and scholars interpreting his work have pointed out that discourses produce "subject positions", locations from which humans can understand themselves and from which they can speak and act (Burr, 2003; Davies & Harre, 1999; Hall, 1996; Henriques, 1998). In this thesis, the concept of "subject position" is seen as providing a lens for looking at how young people are described in public discourses and which possibilities for self-understanding and action this provides them with.

In his later works – which can also be seen as a reaction to the criticism of neglecting agency (see also Section 4.2.2) – Foucault emphasised the role of the individual in the process of subjectification. He introduced the concept of "technologies of the self", describing practices individuals employ to regulate themselves and "transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p. 118). This quote suggests that individuals are not passively subjected to practices exercised on them, but appropriate them through the ability to "deform, transform, bend and divert to their own purposes the disciplinary practices and the relations within which they are enmeshed." (Foucault, 1979, p. 101)

The concept of "technologies of the self" is part of Foucault's bigger concept of "ethics", which he elaborated on in the last phase of his work. Contrary to the traditional understanding, Foucault regarded "ethics" as the relationship an

individual has with him/herself, "the manner in which they comply more or less fully with the standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or prescription" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). He distinguished four dimensions: 1. "ethical substance" – the part of the self that has to be worked on ethically, 2. "the mode of subjectivation" – the way in which people are invited to recognise their moral obligations, 3. "technologies of the self" – the means by which individuals work on themselves, and 4. "telos" – the kind of person we are encouraged to become (Foucault, 2000).

In this thesis, Foucault's thoughts on "ethics" are seen as providing a conceptual tool for analysing how young people negotiate the "moral obligations" suggested in policy and school discourse. Although a detailed analysis including all four dimensions will not be possible, it will be examined how public discourse encourages the young people to become a certain kind of person ("telos") and which ways of realising this it suggests ("technologies of the self"/"mode of subjectivation").

The previous section has laid out the main features of Foucault's understanding of discourse and how it is drawn upon in this thesis. It has been shown that over the course of his work, his focus shifted from examining discursive structures towards processes of subject formation through power and resistance and finally towards examining techniques which individuals apply to themselves to reach desirable states of being. Despite Foucault's increasing emphasis on individual agency in his later work, his thinking has attracted fierce criticism, in particular with regard to his concept of the subject. This and further criticisms related to Foucault's concept of discourse are discussed in the next section.

4.2 Criticisms of Foucault's notion of discourse and limitations

This section presents frequent criticisms of Foucault's approach and discusses the limitations of Foucault's work that are relevant to this study. It focuses on criticisms regarding definitions of discourse, including its boundaries and the status of the

extra-discursive; the possibility of agency, resistance and counter discourse; and the question of whether and how discourse is produced and appropriated in local, everyday contexts. The focus will be on those aspects which are regarded as critical for the study.

4.2.1. Definition of discourse and its boundaries

The majority of criticism levelled at Foucault concerns his overall understanding of discourse, particularly the quality and composition of discourse, its boundaries, and its relation to the extra discursive. While some scholars have argued that Foucault's notion of discourse is too narrowly focussed on language, others have criticised it for being all-encompassing and thus too vague (Jäger, 2001). The first criticism can be rejected insofar as Foucault's concept of discourse was an attempt to go beyond linguistic notions and capture praxeological and material aspects. The second criticism is more serious. Hall (1997) argues that Foucault's too wide definition of discourse renders the concept difficult to operationalise.

Mills (2004) also points out that Foucault does not make clear where the boundaries of discourse lie, pointing to Foucault's inconsistency in his use of the term. Scholars working in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), therefore, limited their understanding of discourse to language or text (Wodak, 2001). It is argued here, however, that limiting discourse to language only, runs the risk of losing valuable insights into the non-material expressions of thought and knowledge. In this thesis, verbal expressions, as well as behavioural practices and material constellations, will be regarded as enactments of discourse.

The problem of what constitutes a discourse is entangled with the question of the boundaries of discourse and the relation between the discursive and the extra-discursive. There are two issues that divide scholars. Firstly, there is the question of whether there is anything outside discourse, and if so how it is related to the discursive. The second issue concerns the question of whether the outer-discursive can be accessed by the analyst and how this can be done.

In their interpretation of Foucault, Kendall and Wickham (1999) state that there is no "inside" and no "outside" of discourse. Discourses are not a representation of a thought or a materiality, but a materialisation. Furthermore, discourses are not produced by structural, historical conditions, but arise from "historic apparatuses" (ibid., p. 37). Although Foucault acknowledged that there might be non-discursive objects and practices, he assumed that they were not accessible to human beings as nothing was meaningful outside of discourse (Foucault, 2002). He can thus be interpreted as not denying the existence of the extra-discursive but bracketing the question of whether there is a reality outside discourse (Burr, 2003; Mills, 2004).

Most other scholars using the idea of discourse in their work make a distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. Scholars associated with the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis[4] have argued that the historical, social and political contexts of discourse have to be taken into account in its analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Hook, 2001). These authors can thus be seen as adhering to a realist perspective which assumes that there is an "objective" reality which does not entirely determine discursive constructions but imposes limits within which they vary (Burr, 2003).[5]

Although it is assumed that the extra-discursive exists and impacts on discourse, this thesis will focus on discourse and its negotiation. It is argued that the way discourse is negotiated is influenced by non-discursive phenomena and by discourses situated in local contexts. Although these phenomena will be referred to, they will not be analysed with regard to their causal influences.

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[4] Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be described as an international network of scholars who share a common perspective on discourse. According to Ruth Wodak, one of the leading protagonists of the network, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as well as its predecessor Critical Linguistics (CL) emerged in reaction to the dominating tendency in linguistics to concentrate on the structure of language. The crucial assumption of CDA and CL is that language is a social phenomenon (Wodak, 2001). Despite the affinity of Critical Discourse Analysts with Foucault's focus on power, only some the scholars draw (explicitly) on Foucault. Others see their roots in different linguistic approaches.
[5] For combinations of a realist perspective with Foucaultian thought see, for example, Parker (1992) and McKee (2009).

4.2.2. Possibility of agency, resistance and counter discourse

A criticism often directed at Foucault's notions of discourse, power and subjectivity is that of neglecting human agency, including the possibility to resist and counter discourses. According to these criticisms, Foucault underplays agency both with regard to the constitution of discourse and the effects they have on individuals.

The criticism of neglecting agency is associated with Foucault's assumption that its origins and location are not to be found in the individual human beings, but emanate from scientific disciplines/institutions and are the products of historical contingencies (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). He thus rejects the idea of the "knowing subject" (Foucault, 1989, p. xv) and the individual "author" (Foucault, 1980).

Related to the problem of agency in the formation of discourse is the question to what extent discourse determines the actions and thinking of individuals and whether they leave room to "act otherwise" (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 94). Foucault's earlier works in particular have been criticised for overstating the authority of discourses and underestimating the possibility for resistance and counter discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Fraser, 1989; Hoy, 1986; McNay, 1994). This position can be partly refuted by citing Foucault's assertion that resistance is inbuilt into power and the possibility to produce counter discourse (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977). However, it has been shown that he did not clarify what is to be understood by counter discourse and under which circumstances subordinated groups develop alternative visions of themselves and act against oppression (Smart, 1982).

In engaging with Foucault's ideas on the formation of the subject, feminist scholars have furthermore criticised Foucault's limited exploration of the process of subjectification (Hall, 1996; McNay, 1994). They have asserted that Foucault's work does not clarify the circumstances in which individuals adopt subject positions, resist them or are unable to assume them. As McNay (1994) points out, this problem results from Foucault's tendency to neglect conceptualising the relationship between discourse and socio-economic context and thus neglect "how the social positioning of individuals intersects with the construction of certain discursive subject positions" (p. 76). This observation is important for this study, which assumes that social

disadvantage exists and influences the construction and individual adoption of discourse.

Attempting to conceptualise processes of subjectification and the possibility of resistance, Weedon (1987) argues that a disparity between the individual's interests and dominant subject positions creates possibilities for resistance, asserting that

> *Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced (...). The discursive constitution of subjects, both compliant and resistant, is part of a wider social play for power. (pp. 112-113)*

This suggests that the aim for the analyst to is to look for the "spaces" between the individual and the subject positions.

One way scholars have interpreted Foucault's ideas on discourse and individual freedom is to suggest that discourses frame individuals' thinking and action but leave room within these limits. Ball (1994), for example, suggests that "we may only be able to conceive of the possibility of response in and through the language, concepts and vocabulary which the discourse makes available to us" (p. 23). According to Ball, individuals act within a "discursive frame" which moves, but "articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment" (ibid.). Taking the possibilities of transformation of discourse seriously and drawing on Foucault's later works, the thesis will look at how individuals transform discourse when using it to suit their "own purposes".

While the above cited critiques of Foucault's notion of discourse refer to the agency of the individual, there are also authors who accuse Foucault of not conceptualising how discourses are taken up in everyday social contexts. This line of criticism is discussed next.

4.2.3 Discourse and everyday context

The criticism that Foucault did not account for social context is stated on the one hand from a theoretical standpoint which challenges Foucault's view that discourse is

detached from individuals and thus from human interaction (see Section 4.2.2). On the other hand, it is portrayed as a limitation which arises from Foucault's concern with reconstructing historical shifts in thought rather than an analysis of everyday human interaction.

The criticisms that Foucault regarded discourse as static and deterministic can be challenged insofar as he saw discourse as constantly enacted and transformed. He asserted that the statement, the basic element of a discourse, is subject to "challenge and struggle" and "becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry" every time it is enacted (Foucault, 2002, p. 118). Thus, the enactment and transformation of discourse is not arbitrary, but dependent on power and interests. This can be further illuminated by the following quote in which Foucault highlighted the relevance of the speaker and the institutional context on the form that discourse adopts:

> *It is this distribution that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those concealed, the enunciation required and those forbidden, that it comprises; with the variants and different effects - according to who is speaking, his [sic] position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated—that it implies; and with the shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes. (Foucault, 1979, p. 100)*

Several authors who have written about discourse in institutional settings emphasise that discourse is transformed in local contexts. The assumption that "discourses take their place in relation to the particularities and contingencies of local circumstance" (Bowe, Gewirtz, & Ball, 1994) has been taken as a starting point for several empirical studies on the appropriation of discourse in institutions (for examples, see Section 4.3.2). Particularly in relation to policy discourse, it has been noted that policy is not simply implemented but subject to translation (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010) and refraction (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997).

Yet, Foucault's assertions about the appropriation and mediation of discourse remain vague and do not explain how this process happens and what forms discourse assume as they enter different contexts. Therefore, several authors have argued for the need for more empirical studies looking at discourse in context (Ball, 1994; McKee, 2009; Raco, 2009). According to these authors, this is particularly relevant for illuminating

how power is exerted and resisted locally. McKee (2009) argues that examining discourse "in situ", which is sensitive to contextual conditions in the form of time and space, would render "visible the actual effects of governing practice, and the behaviour and knowledge of subjugated populations" (p. 467). She maintains, furthermore, that this focus on local resistance would represent "a return to, as opposed to a departure from, Foucault's own thinking" (ibid.).

McKee's proposed approach is underpinned by a "realist" stance, assuming that there are extra-discursive realities which impinge on the ways discourse is appropriated. It can be argued that this results in causalistic view and raises questions as to how to distinguish between "realities" and "discourses" (see also Section 4.2.1). In this study, extra-discursive reality will, therefore, be alluded to, but causal assumptions will be avoided.

Several authors have argued against a notion of discourse as static units determining the sense making of individuals (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990;). In their view, discourse is not to be seen as an object but as a "social practice" (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990). Consequently, the authors see aim of discourse analysis to take into consideration context and agency of individuals and in studying both "how people use discourse, and how discourse uses people" (ibid., p. 213). Rather than seeing sense making of individuals deducible to large discourses, they argue for an inductive approach. The authors propose identifying the "repertoires" from which people use certain "moves", depending on the specific context.

Other authors also advocate complementing Foucault's notion of discourse in order to get insight into how discourse is "done" on an everyday basis. Holstein & Gubrium (2008) argue that Foucault did see discourse as a social practice, in particular in his later work and with respect to the practices of subjectivity. Acknowledging that Foucault was concerned with "discourses-in-practice" (p. 182), they nevertheless contend that a more insightful analysis would also consider "discursive practice", focussing on the everyday processes of talk and interactions

with which meaning is achieved. Put briefly, they argue to consider the "hows" and well as the "whats".

In this study, it is acknowledged that the everyday forms of talk, accessed in the school context, cannot be traced back entirely to large, scientific discourse, nor is it producing closed discourses in itself. Therefore, it is assumed that the actors here engage in discursive practices and draw on discursive repertoires which might be present in different spheres. While it could be argued that the analysis concentrates on everyday discursive practice, it will focus on the content rather than the accomplishment of the actors' meaning making. In Holstein and Gubrium's (2008) words, the focus will be on *what* is said rather than *how* it is said and done.

With respect to characterising everyday meaning making, Waldtschmidt et al.'s (2007) concept of "everyday discourse" is considered useful in study. According to the authors, "everyday discourse" includes routine, as well as the generation of typologies and structures of relevance, which enable individuals to judge and act. The identification of structures of relevance is particularly interesting for the investigation of young people's negotiation of discourse. It will be assumed that individuals negotiate dominant ideas with regard to their relevance in relation to everyday experience and action. It can then be asked how different – and possibly conflicting – discourses are negotiated.

The previous section has discussed some of the criticisms of Foucault's notion of discourse including the – interwoven – questions on the status of discourses, agency and resistance and the enactment of discourse in everyday context. Throughout the section, it was pointed out that Foucault's ideas can be challenged theoretically or regarded as requiring extension and clarification. In this study, the second stance will be adopted. With consideration as to how discourse is taken up, transformed and resisted and how this is influenced by context, it is argued that Foucault's thinking provides a starting point for this study, but needs to be complemented by further theoretical "tools". The following section will therefore present concepts that will be adopted in this study, to build a theoretical and methodological framework for

examining how the discourse on aspiration are enacted in a school setting and negotiated by individuals.

4.3 Conceptualising the appropriation of discourse in context

This section reflects the attempt to mobilise Foucault's thoughts for this study, which aims to analyse both policy discourse and discursive practices in a local institutional context. It outlines the building blocks of the theoretical framework that was adopted for this study. The first section shows the assumptions in this study regarding the characteristics of policy discourse. The second section outlines the understanding of discourse in institutional and other social settings, with a focus on how policy is enacted and drawn on. The third section shows how the negotiation of discourse by individuals is understood, including how resistance and counter discourse can be understood. As the study of discourse "in situ" (McKee, 2009) has not yet been conceptualised in a coherent way, empirical studies are drawn on.

4.3.1 Policy discourse

Ball (1994) has pointed out that policy has several facets; it can be regarded as text, process, outcomes and discourse. Policy can be seen as a part of discourse and discourse itself. Drawing on Foucault's notions of discourse and power, Ball (1994) argues that treating policy *as* discourse entails looking for "the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge'" (p. 21). This implies an understanding of policy as a medium which exerts power by shaping what we know and regard as "true". In Ball's view, however, policies do not just exert power but can "posit a restructuring, redistribution and disruption of power relations, so that different people can and cannot do different things" (p. 20). Thus, policy (discourse) can be seen as a mediator of power relations, giving certain people authority to undertake certain actions.

Adopting the view that policy discourse is engaged in producing understanding of the world, the way in which this occurs needs to be clarified. It has been pointed out

that policy discourse, for example in the form of policy documents, is characterised by a problem-solution structure. It problematises social issues, often alongside constructing specific "problem groups", and proposes solutions (Scheurich, 1994; Ball, 2008). Drawing on research evidence, policy texts tend to be underpinned by causal "logics", presenting causes and effects, and present levers for policy. As Ball (2008) points out: "education policies construct the 'problems' they address and thus, the solutions they propose" (p. 94). In addition to providing knowledge about "problems", policy discourses also offer subjects a way to understand themselves (Ball, 1994; Bradford & Hey, 2007).

Several authors have pointed out that the notion of policy as discourse runs the risk of conceptualising policy discourse as a coherent entity on the one hand, and deterministic on the other hand. Ball (1994) therefore complements the idea of policy as discourse with the idea of policy as text and thus as comprising multiple voices, contradictions, tensions and pointers to silenced voices. According to this view, policies are not clear, closed and complete, but products of multiple influences. Educational policy has been described as "bricolage" (Ball, 1994, 1998). This view suggests that policy itself is influenced by a multiplicity of other discourses whose ideas are assembled in a way that is not always coherent. Although Ball portrays this view as contrary to ideas by Foucault, it seems to reflect Foucault's notion of discourse as a struggle between co-existing dominant and non-dominant ideas.

Seeing policy as a discourse/text that exerts power also entails the question of its effects on practices. Several authors have stated that policy ideas are not simply taken up in institutional and other contexts, but are enacted, transformed and resisted (Bowe, Gewirtz, & Ball, 1994; Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010; Nixon, Walker, & Baron, 2002b; Trowler, 2001). The following section aims to give an understanding of how discourse is transformed when it enters institutional and other social contexts.

4.3.2 The appropriation of (policy) discourse in social settings

The assertion that policies are not simply implemented but enacted, negotiated and contested has underpinned a number of empirical studies in the field of education

policy research (Bowe et al., 1994; Braun et al., 2010) and in the field of management and organisational studies (see, for example, Du Gay, Salaman, & Rees, 1996). These studies have sought to further develop the understanding of the process of policy appropriation and identify the contextual characteristics that impinge on this process. In this section, some of the studies from the educational field will be discussed. Most of these studies look at the implementation of specific policies and thus differ from this study which concentrates on the salience of *ideas* prominent in policy discourse.

Three studies are examined more closely here. Two studies were conducted in educational institutions: Trowler (2001) examined how the New Higher Education discourse is appropriated by academic staff at an English university, while Braun et al.'s (2010) study was concerned with the realisation of a government policy on personal learning and thinking skills in two school contexts. The third study (Nixon, Walker, & Baron, 2002b) looked at the appropriation of a policy originating from the US at council and community level in Scotland.

The three studies conclude that the way policies or policy discourses are taken up in social settings is influenced by a number of factors, including structural, cultural and individual ones. Both Nixon et al. (2002b) and Braun et al. (2010) highlight the importance of social, historical and political context and the resulting cultural characteristics of the community or school. Nixon et al.'s (2002b) study emphasises local norms and "webs of significance" as important dimensions influencing the appropriation of policy at the local level, whereas Braun et al. (2010) assert that school ethos needs to be considered when examining the realisation of policy in schools.

Trowler's (2001) study concentrates on the contextual factors of the institutional setting itself and how they shape the possibilities for resistance and negotiation by individuals within it. Similar to Braun et al. (2010), he argues that individual, as well as institutional, factors are significant. Trowler (2001) concludes that possibilities for resistance depend on the availability of alternative "repertoires" in a specific locale

as well as structural and material conditions. The assumption of the importance of "repertoires" is similar to Nixon et al.'s (2002b) assertion that "cultural values" can be drawn on to resist dominant discourse. Rather than examining "repertoires" at community level, however, Trowler focuses on "repertoires" within the institution.

For this study, several insights are considered helpful. When examining the enactment of ideas on aspiration in the school, institutional characteristics, such as ethos and relationships between actors, are relevant. As this study is concerned with the negotiation of ideas, and is thus similar to Trowler's research, the idea of "repertoires" available in the setting and their importance for resistance and negotiation will be drawn on. When looking at young people's sense making, Nixon et al.'s (2002b) study provides helpful pointers by suggesting to take into account local values when examining the negotiation and possible resistance of dominant ideas.

Having discussed how the enactment and negotiation of policy discourse can be understood at the level of institutional and wider social settings, the following section will concentrate on the modalities of individuals' negotiation of discourse.

4.3.3 The individual appropriation of discourse

This section draws on Foucault's later works in which he developed ideas on subject formation and how individuals resist and transform power. This will be complemented by literature which has further conceptualised counter discourse and resistance at an individual level.

By attributing agency to the individual, Foucault assumed that individuals were able to resist and counter dominant discourse. Drawing on this idea, several scholars have tried to further define the notion of resistance and differentiate several forms. Most scholars agree that there is no fixed definition of resistance and see resistance as being multidimensional and context specific (Armstrong & Murphy, 2012; Burman, 1996; Riessman, 2000). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that manifestations of resistance are in themselves often ambiguous and multidimensional. People's actions

can be resistant in one aspect and compliant in a different one (Armstrong & Murphy, 2012; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). It is therefore important to look at the whole of people's expressions and to be sensitive to the context in which resistance takes place.

One way of operationalising resistance is to distinguish between resistance that is language based and material/physical expressions of resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Drawing on studies on patients' reactions to medical discourse, Armstrong and Murphy (2012) suggest a differentiation between "conceptual" and "behavioural" resistance. Patients can resist a therapy or medical advice on the "conceptual" level by rejecting the reasoning behind and/or on the "behavioural" level, by opting out of treatment or acting against advice. The ways in which conceptual resistance is exercised again varies. Individuals may draw on personal experience, practical knowledge or on alternative expert discourses.

Other studies which have worked with young people in educational settings can add to the understanding of forms of resistance to educational practices. In a study on pupils' reactions to school exclusion, Marks (1996) identifies the following forms: rejecting to identify with given subject positions, constructing multiple identities, constructing media for alternative discourses, drawing on experience, and using humour.

This study will look at how pupils resist forms of action and subjectivity, as well as knowledge, suggested in the messages conveyed in the school. Therefore, the concepts of "conceptual" versus "behavioural" resistance, as well as resistance to subject positions, are drawn on. Forms of resistance which are based in non-verbal behaviour or use linguistic devices, such as humour, will also be taken into account, but will have to be accessed through language-based data.

There are few conceptual ideas on how individuals' cultural and socio-economic positions impact on the way they negotiate and produce discourse (see also Section 4.2.2). However, several authors have researched the link between individuals' positions in structures of inequality and the way they negotiate dominant discourse.

With respect to discourses on aspiration and success several studies have argued that young people's positions at the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender create specific possibilities and difficulties of adopting dominant notions of educational achievement (see, for example, Archer et al., 2010; Archer et al., 2007; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Bradford & Hey 2007; see also Section 3.2.2). These studies described a tension between educational achievement and participation with certain forms of working class masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that young people who do not correspond with the "ideal", that is the white, male, middle-class pupil, tend to be described as "deviant" by teachers, which leads to limited possibilities of experiencing legitimate forms of educational success for these young people.

4.4 Chapter summary and research questions

This chapter has outlined Foucault's concepts of discourse, power and subjectivity, has discussed the main critiques of his theoretical assumptions and has illustrated how Foucault's work is drawn upon and complemented in this thesis. It showed that Foucault's early notion of discourses as structured entities provide a tool for examining patterns and knowledge claims of current debates on aspiration. His later works, which focused on how subjects are shaped through power and resistance, are seen as a basis for examining how discourses on aspiration exert power by providing young people with possibilities to understand themselves. This is complemented with Foucault's ideas on ethics, which shed light on the processes by which individuals turn themselves into desirable ways of being. This enables the examination of the agency of young people when negotiating "moral obligations" suggested by messages on aspiration.

The criticisms which were considered important for this study regarded questions on how discourse is defined and related to the extra-discursive, the possibility of agency, and how discourse is enacted in institutional and informal contexts. In discussing the criticisms, it was established that, in this thesis, it will be assumed that there are extra-discursive phenomena which impact on discourse, but that these will

only be alluded to in the analysis. As this thesis looks at how discourse is enacted and negotiated in different contexts, criticisms regarding the understanding of individual agency and the possibility of transformation of discourse in different contexts are acknowledged. While holding on to a Foucaultian perspective, concepts which extend this perspective are drawn upon.

Following on from Foucault's concepts and the need to consider their criticisms, the conceptual starting points for the study were outlined. This included conceptualising discourse in policy, institutional contexts and individual sense making. It was established that policy can be seen as producing knowledge by constructing "problems" and "solutions", as well as subject positions. It is assumed that in institutions, which can be seen as arenas in which different discourses are present, ideas from policy and other public spheres are enacted under the influence of different circumstances, including institutional structures, individual actors and the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. At an individual level, it is assumed that discourse is negotiated and can produce different forms of resistance, including "behavioural" and "conceptual" resistance. Moreover, individuals' social positions shape their possibility of taking up subject positions suggested by official forms of discourse.

On the basis of the outlined theories and concepts, the following research questions were developed:

- **Research question 1**: How do policy debates problematise aspiration? What knowledge do these debates produce about aspiration and what moral obligations do they place on schools and young people?

- **Research question 2**: How is aspiration problematised by staff in a school context and how are ideas on aspiration enacted in school practices? What moral obligations are placed on the pupils in the school?

- **Research question 3**: How do young people negotiate the knowledge and moral obligations they encounter in the school? What forms of subjectivity and action do young people construct as valuable for themselves and what discursive offers do they draw on?

- **Research question 4**: When comparing policy, school and young people, what convergences and divergences can be identified? How are knowledge and moral obligations adopted, resisted and appropriated and what does this say about power at work?

Having outlined the conceptual starting points and the research questions for this study, the following chapter will show how the theoretical assumptions were translated into a methodological framework.

Chapter 5: Methodology and methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the methods and how they were applied. The first section positions the research within existing research paradigms and discusses the ontological and epistemological underpinnings. In the second section, the research questions and the theoretical concepts are restated, in order to provide a bridge between the study design, which is outlined in the subsequent sections.

The third section of the chapter outlines the overall approach to study, illustrating how recent frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis shaped the conceptual lenses for this study. Following on from this, the chapter will outline the data sources used in this study and the main considerations made when selecting the research setting. The fourth section justifies the choice of methods of data collection, outlines the sampling strategy and provides some reflections on the experience of conducting the study. In the fifth section, the ethical considerations and dilemmas arising before and during the study are discussed. This is followed by the final section, which outlines how the data were analysed.

5.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning of the study

Each research project is guided by beliefs. These premises are commonly referred to as "research paradigms" or "interpretive frameworks" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In social research, particularly in the field of qualitative research, stating one's research paradigms is seen as an expression of good practice which gives the research credibility. A research paradigm can be described as "a basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17) which clarifies the nature of the research objects, the knowledge that can be gained about them and how this is to be done, that is the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises (Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The following section outlines the

ontological stance that is adopted for this study, followed by the epistemological underpinnings.

5.1.1 Positioning the study in a research paradigm

There is no consensus regarding the classification of different research paradigms. Traditionally, scholars tended to distinguish between three broad paradigms: positivism/post-positivism; critical theory and interpretivism/constructivism (Guba, 1990; Willis, 2007). More recent attempts to group paradigms have included paradigms that are based on postmodern, post-structuralist and feminist thought (see, for example, Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). For others, movements such as postmodernism and feminism cut across critical and interpretivist paradigms (Willis, 2007) and are to be seen as ideological perspectives rather than research paradigms (Creswell, 2007). While some classifications are based on underlying philosophical programmes, other distinctions emphasise stances towards research, for example including post-structuralist and feminist approaches under the label of advocacy/participatory approaches (Creswell, 2009).

A fundamental ontological difference can be found between positivism/post-positivism and constructivist/interpretivist approaches. While positivism assumes that there is a reality driven by natural laws and mechanisms that can be accessed by the researcher, constructivism assumes that reality is inseparable from human constructions (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These constructions are multiple, but can be shared among groups and are locally, culturally and historically specific (Burr, 2003; Guba, 1990).

As this research aims to examine the constructions of knowledge and subjectivity through discourse and discursive practices, it can be seen as underpinned by constructivist assumptions. Burr (2003) argues that approaches associated with social constructivism share certain basic features: They take critical stance towards the possibility of gaining secure knowledge about the world, they emphasise that knowledge is historically and culturally specific, and they assume that knowledge comes into existence through social processes. Michel Foucault's work can be seen

as constructivist given his assumption that what we consider as "real" is inextricably linked to historically variable discourses. Like most constructivist approaches, Foucault saw language as central in constituting "reality" (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2008).

Within social constructivism, there are, however, different views regarding the question of whether there are phenomena which exist outside these social constructions and how the non-constructed and the constructed are linked. One position assumes that although there might be phenomena outside our constructions, these are not accessible to us. By stating that we cannot access the extra-discursive, Michel Foucault's theory can be assigned to this position (see Section 4.2.1). A second position presumes that our constructions are underpinned by "real" phenomena, which can be accessed indirectly. This ontological assumption is also attributed to Critical Realism, which proposes that social phenomena are "generated by underlying, relatively enduring structures" (Willig, 1999, p. 45) and cannot be accessed directly, but only through their effects (Willig, 1995).

A further position, adopted by some discourse analysts, is to regard discourses themselves as supra-individual structures that shape constructions of individuals and groups or as Bührmann et al. (2007) put it, "a construction of collective orders of knowledge as supra-individual realities" (p. 1). Following Foucault's thinking, it can be assumed that although discourse is to be seen as enacted by individuals, it does not originate from an individual "author" (see Section 4.2.2). It is thus assumed here that discourses are social constructions that are upheld, transformed and enacted by humans but, at the same time, exist relatively independent from the individual.

In this thesis, a realist ontological position is, therefore, adopted in two ways. Firstly, by assuming that discourses are influenced by the social positions of individuals as well as institutional contexts (see Section 4.2.1) and secondly, by regarding discourses as "supra-individual realities" which "exist" relatively independent of individuals. As indicated in Chapter 4, this thesis focuses on social constructions in the form of discourses and how they are deployed in different settings of social interaction. The extra-discursive will not be investigated in its own right, but will be

referred to, in order to make assumptions about how certain contexts influence the transformation of discourse.

Epistemological assumptions indicate how the relationship between the researcher and the object of study is seen, including what is to be known and how this knowledge can be gained (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this thesis, the epistemological stance is marked by a tension between constructivist and realist assumptions. As stated above, it is assumed that discourses can be regarded as "real" in the sense that they are *social* constructions, "existing" independent from the individual. Following on from this, it can be suggested that it is, at least to some extent, possible for the researcher to reconstruct this "reality".

On the other hand, it can be argued that regarding "reality" as constructed by social agents implies that the researcher's account also has to be seen as socially mediated. Several authors have highlighted that the influence of constructivist and post-structuralist thought has rendered the idea that the social researcher can capture lived experience and gain secure knowledge problematic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; MacLure, 2003; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). According to Denzin & Lincoln (2008), this has led to a "triple crisis", rendering the "representation" of social reality, the "legitimation" of research findings and the possibility to effect social change problematic (pp. 26-27). The subsequent sections, therefore, discuss how these issues are understood and addressed in this thesis. Issues of representation and reflexivity are addressed first, followed by a discussion of criteria of legitimation and the status of the research findings and political engagement of the researcher.

5.1.2 Issues of representation and reflexivity

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), the postmodern turn raised the question of the relationship between the researcher and the object which is studied. The researcher has to be seen as "actor, designer, interpreter, writer, co-constructor of data, ultimate arbiter of the accounts proffered, and as accountable for those accounts" (Clarke, 2005, p. 12). With regard to qualitative research, it can no longer

be unproblematically assumed that the research account reflects the "real" experiences of the research participants.

The question of representation has implications for the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the interpretation and representation of the data and the criteria of its evaluation (Burr, 2003). Scholars have addressed this by including several "voices" in their research account and tried to make the role of the researcher visible in the research (Lumby & Jackson, 2003). In this research, which is less concerned with capturing "real" experience of individuals, but with discursive positions, it was decided to show the breadth of positions present in the setting. By including a high number of quotes in the analysis, the thesis illustrates how the conclusions were arrived at.

As the researcher is present in the research in several ways, reflexivity can be applied to different aspects. Firstly, it can refer to the influence the researcher has on the findings both by choosing a certain topic and approach, and by interacting with the research participants in the concrete research situation (Taylor, 2001). Secondly, it can refer to the status of the researcher's account. Burr (2003) highlights that by adopting the view that reality is constituted through language, the researcher's account is to be seen as a construction, just like the accounts of the participants.

This raises the question as to what extent alternative interpretations of research findings, given by the participants or the researcher, should be included in a piece of research – a question that is also entangled with ethical issues. It has been argued that a reflexive account can redress the power imbalances between the researcher and the researched by commenting on the relationship between researcher and researched or by including "readings" by the participants and thus avoiding that their "voices" are appropriated by the interpretation of the researcher (Wetherell, 2001). The question also arises to what extent the researcher should reflect on his or her own presence in the research. With respect to discourse analysis, several authors have argued that a reflexive account should be a feature of any good analysis (Gill, 1996; Mills, 2004; Rose, 2007; Tonkiss, 2004). On the other hand, it has been concluded that including

too many reflexive layers in a piece of research can lead to an "infinitive interpretative regress" (Wetherell, 2001, p. 397).

Wetherell (ibid.), therefore, argues that acknowledging the constructed nature of a research account does not necessarily mean that this needs to be made explicit in the analysis. This thesis adopts Wetherell's view and assumes that it suffices to make the theoretical and methodological approach transparent. Furthermore, it is not considered appropriate in this study to invite the participants to offer their interpretations. This is based on the assumption that adopting a discourse analysis perspective implies examining patterns of meaning making rather than uncovering the underlying meaning and beliefs of individuals (Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Taylor, 2001). In order to highlight, however, that this research is not a neutral representation of the "reality", it is considered important to strive for transparency and to give the research findings legitimacy, an aspect which is discussed next.

5.1.3 Criteria of legitimation

Issues of legitimation concern the ways in which the quality of research can be evaluated. In the positivist or post-positivist tradition research findings are required to be "valid", "reliable", and "generalisable" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Validity, in this view, is achieved if the research instruments measure what they are meant to measure; reliability requires that the findings can be replicated when applying the same methods and instruments; and generalisability is achieved if the research findings apply to the whole class of phenomena investigated (Kirk & Miller, 1986). In qualitative research, which is usually underpinned by interpretivist rather than positivist or post-positivist assumptions, these criteria are problematic (Robson, 2002). Claiming the research findings to be valid is impossible if one assumes that the research account is not an accurate representation of reality (Taylor, 2001). Furthermore, as qualitative research investigates phenomena which are generally not considered to be underpinned by static rules, it is impossible to replicate findings. And finally, generalisability becomes problematic due to the small sample sizes in most qualitative research (Silverman, 2001).

It has, therefore, been argued that qualitative approaches to research require different criteria of legitimation. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, have suggested replacing validity and reliability with "trustworthiness", which includes credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Other researchers argue that the traditional criteria should be applied differently. Tonkiss (2004) argues that discourse analytic research can only claim "internal validity". This can be gained by applying interpretive rigour and by presenting a coherent argument. It also implies that any claims that are made in the research should be well supported by the data. These guidelines are followed in this thesis by citing extensively from the original data, as well as by illustrating the analytic steps that led to the conclusions.

Several authors have furthermore highlighted that although most qualitative research cannot claim to produce generalisable results in the positivist or post-positivist sense, it usually aims to make claims that go beyond the researched case. Some authors have argued that instead of generalising to a wider population, qualitative research can make generalised claims regarding the characteristics of the social phenomena studied (Gobo, 2004; Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2001). Research that examines discourse, understood as culturally anchored units of meaning, can thus make claims about its characteristics (Taylor, 2001).

Aiming for this type of theoretical generalisation has implications for sampling (Silverman, 2001). Not aiming for representativeness, sampling in qualitative research is usually purposive, aiming to identify "groups, settings and individuals (…) where the processes being studied are most likely to occur" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 202). Furthermore, purposive sampling, sometimes also referred to as theoretical sampling, implies that categories or people are selected to study because of the relevance for the research questions, or the theoretical and analytical assumptions (Mason, 2002). Thus, the aim of purposive or theoretical sampling is gaining representativeness not with respect to a population, but regarding concepts (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008). In this thesis, a purposive sampling strategy is adopted (see also Section 5.3.4). The study aims to claim some generalisability about the characteristics of discursive practice. Furthermore, as discourses are seen as

socially shaped and their negotiation as dependent on contextual features, it is assumed that the research findings can, to some extent, be transferred to contexts with similar institutional and socio-economic characteristics.

5.1.4 Status of the research findings and political engagement of the researcher

The view that "reality" is socially constructed has several implications for the claims that can be made on the basis of research findings. Several authors have highlighted that constructivist approaches, including discourse analysis, tend to be seen as implying a relativist stance (Burr, 1995; Gill, 1995; Willig, 1995). At an epistemological level, one may ask which status research findings can claim, given that they have to be regarded as a construction. At a moral level, a question arises on the extent to which value judgements and political engagement are possible.

The assumption that the account produced by the researcher has to be seen as another discourse (Wetherell, 2001) raises the question if the discourse produced in the research can claim a special status in comparison with the discourses it examines and if not, how it can claim to be a worthwhile endeavour. Drawing on Hall (1988), Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue that because scholarship has its own "machinery of representation" with specific codes, rules and procedures. Research accounts can claim value because they offer a form of representation that is different from others. Therefore, the findings presented in this thesis are understood as constructed on the basis of certain rules underpinning the scholarly research and the methodology used.

Adopting a discourse analytic approach also raises the question of what types of claims can be made on the basis of the research findings and if value judgements are possible. Drawing on Willig (1995) , Burr (1995) points out that "the power of discourse analysis and deconstruction is in showing that 'things could be different'" (p. 25). However, she also highlights that constructivism does not prescribe "which constructions of the world we should adopt, which 'discourses' we should support and what choices we should make in our actions and recommendations for change" (p. 24).

If we follow Foucault's understanding of Genealogy, the analysis of discourse has the specific concern of uncovering discourses which have been silenced through power struggles (Clarke, 2005). Furthermore, it is an aim of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis to examine how power is exerted by dominant discourse through providing individuals with possibilities to speak and act (see Section 4.1.2). It could thus be argued that a discourse analysis which draws on Foucault is concerned with highlighting the effects of power. However, instead of giving voice to oppressed individuals or groups, the emphasis is on bringing alternative knowledge to the fore. Gill (1995) makes a similar argument when seeing discourse analysis as characterised by its potential to deconstruct the "false universality" of Enlightenment thought.

Given these assumptions, the question of the extent to which the researcher should adopt a political stance remains. Some authors argue that drawing political conclusions from research goes beyond the remit of the researcher and that basing research on value judgements undermines its credibility as it predetermines the findings (Wetherell, 2001). Other authors argue that discourse analysis lends itself to making political claims (see, for example, Gill, 1995; Willig, 1995). Indeed, Willig (1995) argues that a disengaged position is impossible, because the choice of the research topic and the application of the research findings is always guided by the values of the researcher. She moreover argues that "we can only ever argue against, support or subvert particular practices or causes but we can never disengage ourselves from them. An attempt to disengage necessarily serves to consolidate the status quo." (p. 96). While this thesis adopts the latter position, it is not guided by an explicit political agenda, but general concern with the social implications of the research findings (Wetherell, 2001).

5.2 Guiding principles: Research questions and concepts

The research questions that have guided the methodological approach in this study arose from an interest in investigating discursive production and enactment of

aspiration (see also Chapter 1). After familiarising myself with discourse theories and concepts (see Chapter 4), the research questions were refined. They are:

- **Research question 1**: How do policy debates problematise aspiration? What knowledge do these debates produce about aspiration and what moral obligations do they place on schools and young people?

- **Research question 2**: How is aspiration problematised by staff in a school context and how are ideas on aspiration enacted in school practices? What moral obligations are placed on the pupils in the school?

- **Research question 3**: How do young people negotiate the knowledge and moral obligations they encounter in the school? What forms of subjectivity and action do young people construct as valuable for themselves and what discursive offers do they draw on?

- **Research question 4**: When comparing policy, school and young people, what convergences and divergences can be identified? How are knowledge and moral obligations adopted, resisted and appropriated and what does this say about power at work?

The assumptions underpinning the research questions draw on the notion of discourse developed by Michel Foucault, who asserted that discourses are groups of statements organised according to rules; that they are enacted through both language based and non-language based practices; and that they are constitutive of the social world in that they construct objects and subjects (see Section 4.1.1). On the basis of criticisms, limitations of Foucault's work regarding individual agency and the understanding of discourse in everyday context, it was concluded that discourses are negotiated, appropriated and resisted (see Sections 4.2.3 and 4.3.2). Drawing on Foucault's later concept on "ethics", it was highlighted that although discourses produce "moral obligations" on individuals, these have agency in being able to adopt, transform and resist these demands (see Sections 4.1.2 and 4.3.3).

Although it is assumed that discursive practices in official spheres, that is in policy and schools, have force on individuals, this does not mean that this thesis adopts a linear model which sees policy as impacting top-down on young people and schools.

Instead, it is assumed that different, competing discourses or discursive fragments are present. In institutional settings, ideas originating from spheres such as science and policy are negotiated with discourses present in everyday contexts. The research questions, therefore, aim to investigate how ideas present in policy are related to the discursive practices of schools and young people. By doing this, it is hoped to arrive at conclusions on processes of negotiation, resistance and submergence of discourse and, consequently, on how power is played out.

Having stated the research questions and their theoretical underpinning, I now turn to explaining how these assumptions were translated into the conceptual and methodological framework for the study.

5.3 Methodological approach

This section demonstrates the overall methodological approach to the research. The first part introduces the approach of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis (FDA) this study draws upon and situates it in the wider methodological field. Following on from this, the second part outlines the data sources considered in this study. The third part of the section discusses the considerations made when choosing the school setting, where most of the data collection for this study was conducted. This is followed by an outline of the three stages in which the study was conducted.

5.3.1 Analytic approach and framework

It is frequently highlighted that Michel Foucault's writings on method remain vague (Keller, 2007; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). However, Archaeology and Genealogy are generally described as the "tools" Foucault used when conducting his analyses of historical phenomena (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Archaeology and Genealogy differ in their focus. The former looks at the constitution of discursive objects; its aim is to "excavate" discursive structures that have grown over time (Mills, 2004). Genealogy, by contrast, examines how discourses come into being over time within specific power relations (Henriques, 1998). While Archaeology can be described as a "snapshot" of discourse at a certain

point in time, Genealogy is concerned with "the processual aspects" (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Archaeology and Genealogy have been applied empirically in particular in the area of policy analysis. Archaeological policy analyses tend to identify the conditions under which a policy problem arises (Scheurich, 1994) whereas genealogical analyses examine its historical development in relations of power (Carabine, 2001; Gale, 1999).

The concept of discourse played a particularly central role in Foucault's Archaeological work (see Section 4.1.1). In The Archaeology of Knowledge (Foucault, 2002), he reflected on Archaeology as a method, stating that it "describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive" (p. 148). He proposed a number of steps, examining "which object or area of knowledge is discursively produced", "according to what logic is the terminology constructed", "who authorised it" and "which strategic goals are being pursued" (Diaz-Bone et al., 2007, pp. 3-4). Foucault's approach of Archaeology can therefore be seen as a method that examines the historical conditions of the existence of discourses, as well as its internal composition and underpinning structures (ibid.).

Over the last twenty years, scholars have become increasingly interested in applying Foucault's notion of and approach to discourse to the empirical study of discourses (ibid.). Bührmann et al. (2007) have argued that this has led to an emerging field of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis[6] within qualitative research. This field encompasses a number of strands and sub-fields, which diverge in their views on how Foucault's notion of discourse can be deployed for empirical analysis. These sub-fields are largely country specific and draw on national philosophical traditions (Diaz-Bone et al., 2007).

In the UK, Foucaultian ideas have majorly influenced the field of Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology (ibid.). Within these fields, several authors have proposed methodological procedures of doing a discourse analysis (see, for example,

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[6] Sometimes also spelled Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. For reasons of consistency, one spelling will be adhered to in this thesis.

Fairclough, 1995, 2001; Parker, 1992). While these approaches are geared towards the analysis of official documents, recent approaches to Foucaultian Discourse Analysis propose frameworks which can also be applied to individual interviews, artefacts, institutional practices and interactions (see Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Rose, 2007; Willig, 2008). While these approaches draw explicitly on Foucault's tools of Archaeology and Genealogy, there are approaches to discourse analysis which do not claim to draw on Foucault's concepts, but are informed by his notion of discourse (see Gill, 1996; Tonkiss, 2004).

Approaches to Foucaultian Discourse Analysis provide theoretical and analytical lenses, but do not determine a specific research design. This, as Clarke (2005) highlights, depends on the specific research questions of a project. Clarke sees the particular strength in bringing discourse data from different "domains" together (p. 176) in the potential to better capture "the increasingly complex, diffuse, geographically, discursively, and/or otherwise dispersed aspects of research topics" (p. 165). As it was assumed in this project that discursive practices around aspiration were manifest in a number of ways in the policy sphere and in a school setting, it was regarded necessary to examine a variety of data sources. The choice of these sources and the selection of the concrete research setting will be explained next.

5.3.2 Data sources and research settings

Before making decisions about the methods of data collection, I needed to determine what would be considered as data sources and, consequently, what research settings would be chosen.

In order to examine official debates on aspiration, I decided to use policy documents as a data source. Although it was assumed that official debates on aspiration are enacted in a number of spheres, such as academia and the media, it was decided to focus on policy due to time constraints. The decision was also based on the assumption that policy is powerful in legitimating certain versions of understanding and initiating certain types of acting (Ball, 1994) and have a major influence on school practices. Furthermore, it was assumed that policy can be seen as an

intermediate sphere between academic/scientific discourse and local practices and sense making (Waldschmidt et al., 2007). Policy discourse can be seen as embodied and enacted in a variety of media, including interactions, persons, buildings and language-based outputs such as documents and speeches (ibid.; Ball, 2008; Braun et al., 2010). Due to practical reasons, it was decided the analysis would be limited to policy documents existing in a written form.

In order to examine how the policy debate on aspiration relates to discursive practices in a concrete setting, it was decided to conduct fieldwork in one secondary school. It was expected that, as an institution, a school would be an "arena" where official forms of discourse meet with everyday discourse (Clarke, 2005). The decision was also based on an initial analysis of the policy documents. Having found that debates on aspiration focus on young people in their teens and see schools as the major context in which aspiration is to be tackled, a secondary school was thus seen as a likely setting where discursive practices on aspiration would be present, both in the form of material and language-based practices. With consideration to the practicalities of data collection, it was also assumed that a school would provide relatively easy access to young people and a safe space to interview them.

Early in the research process, the option of undertaking a study in several schools was considered. A comparison between two schools would have allowed me to identify variation in discursive practices depending on the institutional context (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). It might also have helped to identify the features of the prime research setting more clearly (Flyvberg, 2004; Stake, 2008). I finally decided to focus on one setting for practical and conceptual reasons. Firstly, a study of several settings appeared challenging, given the limited time and resources available for data collection and analysis within a three year PhD project. Secondly, in order to answer the research questions, it was considered more appropriate to examine discursive practice in policy, school and among young people in more depth rather than comparing different school settings.

In the school, it was assumed that discursive practices are embodied in a number of data sources, including verbal and non-verbal practices and interaction; spatial and temporal organisation; artefacts and individual meaning making (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Rose, 2007). However, for analytical and practical reasons, not all these aspects could be captured. Within the limited scope of this study, the collection and analysis of a multiplicity of data was not seen as feasible. This was compounded by the realisation that there are no analytic frameworks for analysing non-linguistic forms of discourse (Rose, 2007). I therefore decided to limit the data sources to language-based manifestations of discourse, which could be found in documents, accounts by individuals, and verbal interaction and practices.

5.3.3 Choice of the school and access

The research was conducted in a comprehensive non-denominational state secondary school in a large urban area in Scotland. In 2010, around 950 pupils, aged 12 to 18 were enrolled in the school. The school's catchment area includes some of the most deprived areas in Scotland according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) with high levels of income and employment deprivation. The population is predominantly white Scottish (Scottish Government, 2012). The area was home to heavy industries until the middle of the 20th century and subsequently underwent regeneration and saw the development of several housing schemes. The level of area deprivation in the school was reflected in the number of pupils receiving free school meals, which was nearly 40 per cent in 2010/2011 compared to a national average of 15.2 per cent (Education Scotland, 2012b).

In the context of a national policy initiative, the school adopted a plan of transformation in 2006 with the aim to improve attendance, raise attainment and increase the number of young people going on to Higher Education. The levels of attainment in the school were lower than the Scottish average: in 2010/2011, around 20 per cent of pupils in the school gained one or more Highers and around 10 per cent three or more awards at Higher level, compared with a national share of 44 per cent and 26 per cent respectively. Yet, exam results in the school had improved considerably since the mid 2000s. Furthermore, the percentage of pupils going on to

Higher Education had risen from below 5 per cent in 2000, to around 20 per cent in 2010/2011, compared with a national average of 36 per cent (Education Scotland, 2012c).

The choice of the school was firstly guided by the research questions. An initial familiarisation with the policy debate indicated that the debate centred on the low aspirations of young people from socio-economically deprived areas, specifically in areas which have experienced a process of deindustrialisation and with a population that can be described as white working class. It was seen as important that the catchment area of the chosen school reflected the characteristics identified in the public debate.

The decision for the specific school was also made for pragmatic reasons; there was an existing connection between the University and the school because previous research had been carried out here. This meant that it was possible to gain insights into the characteristics of the school beforehand and develop preliminary questions guiding the research. The existing connection between the school and the University also meant that little time had to be spent on negotiating access. Being able to count on trust from the side of the school was seen as important for this study which required observing a range of activities over several months, as well as access to pupils and staff.

After gaining ethical approval from the University's ethics committee, I approached the head teacher with an outline of the planned research project. The outline gave details about the envisaged duration of the study, the methods and ways in which consent would be sought from the participants. The head teacher agreed to the fieldwork plan and put me in contact with other staff in the school, who would give me access to different events in the school and to pupils. In the subsequent 13 months, I was free to come to the school without having arranged a previous appointment. I was in close contact with a number of staff including heads of year groups, Personal and Social Education staff and a careers adviser who would inform

me about ongoing events. The fieldwork in the school was conducted in several stages, which will be described in the following section.

5.3.4 Stages of data collection

The data collection process can be divided into three stages, which reflect the research questions. However, when conducting the research, the three stages partly overlapped in time. As it was unknown at the start of the research where discourse on aspiration could be found and what forms it had, the research design was developed on an ongoing basis. Thus, data gathered at one point allowed me to refine the guiding principles and the instruments of the next phase.

The first stage involved collecting policy documents and undertaking an initial analysis. Identifying how 'aspiration' was framed in policy debates, allowed shaping the analytical questions and developing the research instruments used in the school context. However, while carrying out the school study, more policy documents in which 'aspiration' featured prominently were published. Consequently, I continued to extend my sample of policy documents throughout the study.

The second and third stages involved fieldwork in the school setting, which was conducted over a period of 13 months between January 2010 and February 2011. During the second stage, I interviewed school staff, observed events in the school and collected and generated documents. These activities were aimed at capturing the staff views on aspiration and identifying how ideas on aspiration were enacted and conveyed to the pupils. These insights enabled me to develop the guiding analytical questions for the third stage of the research. During this third stage, group discussions and individual interviews with pupils were conducted with a view to eliciting data on how the young people negotiated ideas they encountered in the school and how they constructed their futures.

The experiences during the fieldwork in the school influenced the relative weight of the methods of data collection. While I had initially planned to use observation and ad-hoc interviews as the main methods, it became clear that this strategy would not

yield sufficient data on the way aspiration was negotiated by the young people. This was influenced by three aspects. Firstly, it became clear that it proved too time-consuming to yield relevant data mainly though observations. Secondly, I realised that spontaneous interviews were difficult to conduct because it required time to get to know the pupils and develop trust. Furthermore, the short breaks in between classes left little time to conduct this type of interviews. I, therefore, decided to place more emphasis on group discussions and individual interviews.

The sampling strategy that was used for individual interviews, group discussions, observation and the generation and collection of documents can be described as purposive (see also Section 5.1.3). This also implies that the sampling process is ongoing with a view to gradually "saturate" the categories developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As in this study discursive practices are the units of analysis, the sampling was underpinned by the aim to gain a wide variety of discursive practices. Further sampling considerations were made with respect to data sources, which are discussed with the respective methods below.

Having outlined the methodological approach to the study, the following section will outline in more detail the methods of data collection adopted. It discusses their methodological underpinning, justifies their use in this study and explains how they were applied.

5.4 Methods of data collection

This section outlines the methods of data collection adopted in the study. The first part focuses on the analysis of policy documents, describing the rationale for using documents, the analytic approach adopted in this study and the sampling. This is followed by outlining the methods adopted in the school context: observations (5.4.2), collecting and generating documents (5.4.3), group discussions with young people (5.4.4) and individual interviews with staff and young people (5.4.5). Each part provides a rationale for using the method, shows how the sample was constructed and reflects on the experiences during the data collection.

5.4.1 Analysis of policy documents

While the use of documents as a source of data has a long tradition in historical research, it is not as common in social research. This has been criticised on the basis that documents can be seen as an important elements of social life, whose study can provide valuable insights into social practices and meaning making (Gibson & Brown, 2009). There are different classifications of types of documents, distinguishing between personal versus official documents; visual versus text-based documents; as well as documents created for the purpose of the research versus pre-existing documents (Bryman, 2008; Gibson & Brown, 2009). In this study, official documents pre-existing the research were the basis for the analysis of the policy discourse, whereas documents created for the purpose of the research were used in order to examine the enactment of discourse in the school (see Section 5.4.3).

While policy documents are sometimes studied in order to provide the contextual information, this study is interested in analysing the claims and structure of the texts (McCulloch, 2004). This means that documents are not used as a as a resource, but are the topic of investigation (Prior, 2004). This is linked to the assumption that documents do not represent an underlying social reality, but have their own "documentary reality" (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). On the basis of the theoretical assumptions adopted in this study, documents are not seen merely containing discourse in their texts, but as enacting discourse through their specific material form, their layout, and their textual content and other features.

Since the 1980s, policy analysis has been influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and his concept of discourse (Olssen, O'Neill, & Codd, 2004; Taylor et al., 1997). In contrast with Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, which had dominated critical policy analysis until then, Foucault's work and other post-structuralist approaches entailed a changed understanding of that power and policy. Seeing power as local and capillary, the focus of policy analysis was now on "partial, specific and local ways" of governing rather than on how the state exerted power (Watson, 2000).

As Foucault's analyses focused on discursive practices as systems of rules rather than concrete texts, several scholars have developed frameworks which make Foucault's concepts applicable to a more detailed study of policy documents (Olssen, O'Neill, & Codd, 2004). Some authors have further developed Foucault's approaches of Archaeology and Genealogy for policy analysis (see, for example, Gale, 2001; Scheurich, 1994). These approaches are primarily concerned with identifying the conditions which led to the emergence of a policy problem, including the power constellations of the actors involved (see also Section 5.3.1). In order to reach the aims of this study, this type of approach was not considered suitable. Although this research examines when and in which context the discursive object of 'aspiration' emerged, it does not go as far as reconstructing the conditions that led to this.

Other authors who have further developed a policy analysis inspired by Foucault have focussed on providing models for conducting a fine grained analysis of policy texts. Fairclough (1992) suggests distinguishing between an analysis of social practice, discursive practice and text. For the analysis of "text", he advocates a detailed linguistic analysis, which identifies its structural aspects, as well as aspects such as modality and mood (Fairclough, 1992, 2001). Although Fairclough's model is regarded as providing useful starting points for this study, his model of analysis was regarded as too detailed for this study, which not only focuses on policy discourse, but also on discursive constructions in other spheres.

This thesis, therefore, draws on authors who have proposed frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis, which lend themselves to examining a range of data, including policy texts, interview data, and material objects. Policy documents are here seen as important sources if the aim is to access constructions in "expert", "public" or "official" discourse (see, for example, Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Willig, 2008). How these frameworks were applied to the analysis is illustrated in Section 5.6.1.

Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2008) advise the researcher to decide upon a sample frame, called "corpus of statements", which then guides the selection of discourse

manifestations to be included in the analysis (p. 100). Parker (1992) suggests establishing sampling criteria such as period of time and geographical area. In this thesis, the sample frame could not be defined definitely at the beginning since it was not known when and how the debate on aspiration emerged. It was thus necessary to undertake extensive reading in order to identify when 'aspiration' was first debated in the way it is at present. After concluding that 'aspiration' became an "object of thought" during New Labour's time in government, 1997 was selected as a demarcation point.

As a geographical demarcation, the United Kingdom was chosen, since many of the policy and academic documents refer to the situation (socio-economic structure and subsequent "problems" surrounding education) in Britain as a whole. However, differences between the Scottish context, the UK as a whole and other countries within the UK will be taken into consideration. Scotland has always had its own educational system and has had even more legislative authority over this since devolution in 1999 (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011; see also Section 2.1).

A further sampling decision regards content-related criteria. For Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2008) the criterion for the selection of texts is that "each statement forms the 'conditions of possibility' for the studied phenomenon" (p. 100). In other words, a text is only relevant if its statements make the topic under study possible through producing a distinct way of thinking. Again, it was not possible to establish this criterion beforehand, but only through the analysis itself (Carabine, 2001). Through an initial analysis, it was found that 'aspiration' was a topic in a number of policy fields, including social, educational, and economic policy. Due to time restrictions, it was decided to concentrate on documents or parts of documents which referred to aspiration or any synonymous terms, such as ambition, in their titles and to documents in which 'aspiration' was frequently mentioned. Furthermore, it was decided to limit the analysis to documents which referred to young people's aspirations regarding their post-school futures.

5.4.2 Observations

Observations have been described as the "fundamental base of all research methods" in the social sciences (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 389). While observational techniques tend to be the central method in ethnographic research, they are also frequently used as complementary methods in other qualitative research (Angrosino, 2005; Mason, 2002). It can be assumed that observations lend themselves to studying phenomena such as interaction, practices and talk (Coffey & Atkinson, 2003; Mason, 2002). In this study, observation was therefore seen as a way of capturing discursive practice in the form of language-based and non-language-based interaction and practices. Furthermore, it was assumed that observations would allow me to develop rapport with pupils and staff and gain knowledge about the research setting (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

In traditional ethnography, observations have been favoured over other methods for several reasons. One of them is their "completeness" (Becker & Geer, 1957). As observation involves "gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 378), it allows capturing visual as well as verbal, tactile and other facets of social reality. The second feature often associated with observations is its immediacy and naturalness. It is assumed that observations allow the researcher to study social processes as they would naturally occur because the research setting is not stimulated or manipulated (Adler & Adler, 1994; Bryman, 2008).

Considering the influence of post-structuralist thought on qualitative methodology, including ethnography, the uncontaminated character of observations has been questioned (Angrosino, 2005). Firstly, it has been highlighted that observed participants are influenced by the presence of a researcher. Secondly, the notion of the objective observer has been rejected (Mason, 2002; Walsh, 1994). Instead, as Coffey & Atkinson (2003) state, observations have to be seen as rendering interpretations, rather than naturalistic representations of social phenomena. In this research, it is therefore acknowledged that the data produced through observation are influenced by my presence, position and perspective. Nevertheless, the realist

epistemological position adopted in this study (see Section 5.1.1) implies that observations are seen as way of gaining access to discursive practices. Furthermore, it is assumed that observations allow capturing practices more directly than through interviews.

At a broad level, qualitative, or unstructured, observations can be distinguished from quantitative, or structured, observations. For this study, a qualitative approach was chosen as it was intended to study discursive patterns rather than countable events. Furthermore, approaches to observation can be distinguished with respect to the degree of involvement (Angrosino, 2005). "Participant observation" was not considered feasible in this study, as it was not possible to immerse myself long-term in the school setting and fully participate in the school life. According to Angrosino's classification, the observations resembled "reactive observations", "based on the assumption that the people being studied are aware of being observed and are amenable to interacting with the researcher only in response to elements in the research design" (p. 732). Finally, the observations conducted in this study can be described as "focused" (ibid.) as they concentrate on one issue, namely the discursive practices around aspiration.

Observations for this study were conducted on 19 days, most of which fell into the first six months of the fieldwork. The selection of events for observation was guided by considerations about their relevance to the study and can therefore be considered theoretical or purposive (see Section 5.3.1). An event was considered relevant if it included a message that was targeted at the young people's actions and thinking about their post-school future. Due to time constraints, not all relevant events could be observed. Therefore, a cross section of events was selected with the aim of capturing a broad variety of events, with regard to types of activity, focus, and target group. As it could not be determined at the outset which events would be relevant, the sample was developed on an ongoing basis (Mason, 2002).

On the basis of the theoretical assumptions discussed in Chapter 4, an observation schedule with broad guiding questions was developed (see Appendix 1). While at

first the intention was to capture a variety of manifestations of verbal as well as non-verbal discursive practice, it was later realised that an analysis of a multitude of layers was not feasible and the observations were limited to verbal communication.

According to Gold's (1958) classification, my role during observations could be described as that of a complete observer, as I did not (deliberately) participate in the activities that took place in the school. However, as several commentators have pointed out, it is not possible to adopt the position of a complete observer (Ball, 1990). In fact, I became a partial participant in some situations, for example, when a teacher asked me to help the pupils with a task. Bearing in mind the ethical and practical concerns of note taking (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001), I made notes either during the observations or immediately afterwards. This was considered necessary in order to be able to capture verbal expressions as close to the original utterance as possible (Walsh, 1994). Drawing on the model of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2001), the notes taken during the observation were elaborated after the observation, and complemented by methodological, theoretical considerations and reflections on my role.

5.4.3 Collecting and generating documents in the school

The collection and generation of documents is often used to complement other methods of data collection and thus provide a comprehensive picture of practices and meaning making in a social setting (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Mason, 2002; see also Section 5.4.1). In the context of ethnographic research, it has been argued that photographic documentation allows capturing objects and spaces during the research and thus gives a more rounded picture of the research setting (Pink, 2007). In this study, it is assumed that discursive practices are enacted in and through documents, which means that documents have to be seen as one way of producing social "reality". Consequently, the collection and generation of documents were seen as means to access non-verbal, visual and material expressions of discourses on aspiration.

As is the case with observations, several commentators have questioned that documents can be seen as a direct representation of social reality (Bryman, 2008; Gibson & Brown, 2009). Mason (2002) warns that, in particular, visual images are easily seen as reflecting reality in an unmediated way, although they are to be seen as constructions and an "accomplishment involving perspective and directional gaze" (p. 208). In this study, it is thus acknowledged that the generation of documents through photographs renders a mediated version of an artefact or place. Nevertheless, adopting a realist epistemological perspective (see Section 5.1.1), it was seen as possible to reconstruct discursive practice enacted in the documents. It was further assumed that photographs of artefacts and places would provide a durable and immediate record, which could be drawn upon in the analysis.

The documents drawn upon in this study included researcher-generated documents in the form of photographs that were taken to capture important "sites" – artefacts and places – and pre-existing documents, such as teaching materials. While teaching materials already constitute documents, the sites in the school were transformed into documents by photographing them (Mason, 2002). They can thus be described as documents generated by the researcher, but encapsulating pre-existing artefacts (Silverman, 2010). The photographic documents were used in two ways. Firstly, they were treated as data on the non-verbal ways in which discourse was enacted and secondly, they were used as prompts in the group discussions with young people (Bryman, 2008). This was guided by the assumption that the photographs would elicit the young people's interpretations of school practices and messages.

Overall, 24 photographs of sites were taken. The selection of documents and sites was made on the basis of the same criteria applied to the observations (see Section 5.4.2). A document or site was considered relevant if it conveyed a message on how the young people should think or act about their futures. While it was originally planned to capture a diverse range of sites, including artefacts and spatial arrangements, this was abandoned during the fieldwork because of time restrictions and absence of analytical guidelines (see Section 5.3.2). Instead, I decided to concentrate on those documents and sites which contained text-based data.

After gaining permission from the head teacher, the artefacts were photographed with a digital camera. This was done after regular school hours in order to avoid pupils being captured on the photographs. The reproduction of photographs for purposes of dissemination entailed problems of anonymity in two respects: firstly, because some of the "sites" contained photographs of pupils and secondly, because photographs potentially make the school identifiable to outsiders. While the first issue could be addressed by manipulating the photographs so that no faces could be seen, the second issue proved more difficult to resolve. In order to grant anonymity as far as possible, it was eventually decided not to include photographs in the thesis (see also Section 5.5.3).

5.4.4 Group discussions with young people

The particular strength of group discussions – or focus groups, as they are usually called in literature – is that they allow for interaction between participants. Because they provide the participants with a space to respond to each other, it can be argued that focus groups produce talk that resembles the conversation that would "naturally" happen in a group (see, for example, Kitzinger, 1994). Macnaghten & Myers (2004) argue slightly differently that focus groups produce conversations that social groups do not need to have because of their shared assumptions: "focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives – but don't" (p. 65). This benefit of making reasoning processes explicit makes focus groups a suitable method in this study. As discourses are shared among groups, it is assumed that they can be accessed through facilitating discussions among the pupils.

There are different assumptions as to what phenomena can be researched through focus groups. Studies based on a traditional psychological model and more realist approaches assume that interaction in focus groups reveals participants' inner attitudes and opinions (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Recent social psychology and constructivist approaches, by contrast, assume that attitudes are constructed in context and interaction with others. Focus groups, therefore, provide valuable insights into the interactive accomplishment of opinions (ibid.). Barbour & Kitzinger (1999) adopt a position in between. They highlight that group discussions have the

potential to capture interactive processes of sense making between the participants. According to the authors, group discussions furthermore allow the examination of "how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms (…) within a given cultural context" (p. 5).

This research follows the assumption that views expressed by participants in a focus group are not representations of fixed inner dispositions, but are developed in social contexts. However, it also assumes that people do not have unlimited possibilities to shape their own talk, but that they draw on discourses which exist beyond the concrete situation (Wetherell, 2001). Therefore, focus groups are seen as way of examining how the young people draw on wider discourses and negotiate them interactively.

In addition to conceptual reasons, focus groups are used for the benefits when working with young people. It can be assumed that participants feel safer and more comfortable when they are interviewed in a group (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Hill, 2005). While this is the case for individuals of all age groups, this is particularly important when working with young people as power differentials between the researcher and the participants can be assumed to be greater. By conducting group discussions it is expected that young people would speak more freely and feel that they have more control over the proceedings of the discussion and, therefore, feel they are experts rather than objects of questioning (Hennessy & Heary, 2005).

In this study, the group discussions were set up in a similar manner to traditional versions of focus groups. As in most focus group research, the group discussions were semi-structured, this is loosely pre-structured through the use of a topic guide (see Appendix 2), but gave participants room for discussion and exploration of topics. In addition to this, several visual stimuli were used, based on the assumption that stimuli help initiate the discussion and focus it on a topic (Flick et al., 2007). The use of visuals is particularly suited to working with young people as it makes abstract

topics more palpable (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In the first part of the discussion, the pupils were presented with photographs of relevant "sites" in the school, in order to capture the young people's interpretations and negotiation of the messages they encounter in the school. In the second part of the discussion, the pupils were shown a chart representing the leavers' destinations of the previous year group and photographs of people performing different – occupational and other – activities. It was expected that this would encourage the young people to speak about their perceptions of educational and occupational destinations.

Ten group discussions were conducted, comprising pupils from the year groups S4 and S5/S6. Drawing on evidence from other studies, it was assumed that the young people's thinking about their futures might vary according to background variables, such as gender, age and level of attainment (see Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.3), which led to the construction of a purposive sample based on these characteristics. Mason (2002) cautions against the unreflective use of "common sense classifications", such as gender, age and ethnicity, as sampling criteria. It is assumed here that these classifications are not static categories, which impact on young people's discursive practices in a straightforward way. They are rather used as a, albeit imperfect, way of ascertaining a variety of accounts.

Each group discussions included between three and five pupils. Although traditional focus group research works with larger groups, there are good reasons for small groups. Shier participants feel more comfortable to speak and the individual can potentially contribute more (Bryman, 2008; Eder & Fingerson, 2002). For the same reasons, I planned to conduct the discussions with friendship groups. It was, furthermore, expected that friendship groups would give better insight into the young people's collective meaning making, given the assumption that discourses are shared in groups.

The following table gives an overview of the groups and their composition. The group discussions are numbered in order to allow referring to them in the presentation of findings (Chapter 8).

Group discussions

	Number of pupils	Year group	Gender	Attributed attainment
Group 1	4	S5	Male	Low
Group 2	3	S4	Female	Low
Group 3	5	S4	Male	Low
Group 4	3	S4	Male	Middle
Group 5	3	S4	Female	Middle
Group 6	3	S5	Female	Low
Group 7	3	S4	Female	High
Group 8	5	S5/S6	Male	High
Group 9	5	S4	Male	High
Group 10	2	S5/S6	Female	High

Table 1 Outline of group discussions

In order to identify pupils for group discussions, I worked closely with a teacher who was head of a year group. I accepted the teacher's offer to organise the group discussions for me, assuming that this would prove less time consuming. The teacher composed the groups according to the criteria outlined above and allocated a time during the school day when the group discussion could take place. Leaving the organisation of the groups to the teacher had several disadvantages. It meant that the groups did not always consist of friendship groups as originally intended. It, furthermore, led to the pupils not always being informed fully about the purpose of the research in advance of the sessions. This was addressed by giving detailed information at the beginning of the session (through an information sheet and verbal explanation) – and emphasising the voluntary nature of the participation (see also Section 5.5.1).

Each group discussion lasted about 50 minutes, the length of one school period. This was regarded as appropriate as it meant that the pupils would not miss too much class and seemed sufficient for most of the group discussions. Some group discussions, however, produced such vivid discussion that more time would have been needed to cover all issues in depth. This created a dilemma between giving pupils time to elaborate on issues they regarded as important and covering the topics intended. My role in the group discussion was that of a facilitator (Bloor, 2000). This meant allowing the discussion to unfold freely, but intervening from time to time through

introducing topics and prompting. Each group discussion was tape-recorded and later transcribed.

Most pupils were very eager to voice their opinions and thus most groups produced a vivid discussion. In most groups, there were one or two pupils who seemed to contribute less to the discussion. In some cases, it was possible to animate the person by directly addressing them. In two groups, it proved difficult to keep pupils focussed on the topic, as they resorted to private conversation and joking. Being a non-native speaker made it harder to bring pupils back into the discussion. The effects of the different stimuli used varied. While the photographs of leavers' destinations and occupations caused vivid discussion, materials such as photographs depicting messages on the "motivational posters", created less response, in particular among the lower attaining pupils. This was supposedly due to the abstract language they contained.

5.4.5 Individual interviews with staff and young people

Interviews are one of the most used methods in qualitative research (Bryman, 2008). They are commonly assumed to be more economical than other methods of data collection as the conversation can be focussed on the topics relevant to the research questions. In comparison with other methods, such as observations, which capture actions and talk, interviews allow the researcher to gain insight into an individual's inner state and explore their perceptions and reasoning (Byrne, 2004). These assumptions also underpinned the decision to conduct individual interviews in this study. It was expected that individual interviews would provide a means to explore the reasoning of young people and staff in depth and would allow focussing the talk around topics relevant for answering the research questions. It was also assumed that individual interviews would provide the interviewees with a confidential atmosphere in which they might be more willing to voice their ideas.

Increasingly, scholars have pointed out that accounts gained though interviews are not to be seen as a mere reflection of participants' inner states or opinions. Instead, they need to be seen as a product of the interaction between interviewer and

interviewee and thus as contextual (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The interview product has to be seen as influenced by a number of factors, such as the characteristics of the interview, the participants' anticipation of the interviewer's expectations, the situational context of the interview etc. Consequently, interviews are now largely seen as "constructing" rather than "excavating" social reality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mason, 2002). This implies that qualitative researchers increasingly use the interview as a "topic" rather than "resource", studying the accomplishment of the interaction in an interview rather than using the interview as a window to social reality outside the interview (Byrne, 2004).

While much of the qualitative research which uses interviews is interested in individual perceptions, discourse analytic oriented research aims to identify discursive constructions underpinning the talk of the individual (Wetherell, 2001). The question remains as to what extent the interview account is regarded as "topic" or "resource". While discourse analytic approaches such as conversation analysis focus on the local accomplishment of interaction and meaning making, discourse analysis that draws on Foucaultian ideas tends to be more interested in the discourses drawn on by research participants. It is therefore assumed in this study that although interview accounts have to be seen as a "locally accomplished" version (Rapley, 2004), they are also shaped by broader discourses employed by interviewed staff and pupils (see also Section 5.4.4).

In this research, five semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with staff at the school. This type of interview was assumed to allow a balance between granting the participants freedom to develop their thoughts and potential to focus in order to allow for comparisons of the data (Mason, 2002). A topic guide (see Appendix 3) with broad thematic areas and questions was devised, but handled flexibly during the interview. The questions in the interview schedule were informed by the analytical frameworks on Foucaultian Discourse Analysis proposed (see Sections 5.3.1 and 5.6.3) and were aimed at gaining insights into how staff problematised aspiration. This included their understanding of aspiration and the surrounding issues as well as how they constructed "problems" and "solutions".

The participants included members of the school management team and staff responsible for career guidance and personal and social education (PSE). This choice was made on the assumption that staff in these roles would be involved in shaping pupils' ideas on their post-school trajectories, either by influencing the school's strategy or by giving advice on these issues on a day-to-day basis.

Semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with ten pupils, each of whom had taken part in a different group discussion. The decision to conduct the individual interviews subsequent to the group discussions was based on the assumption that this allowed pursuing some topics from the group discussion in more depth. It was also assumed that the interview situation would be less daunting for the young person if they had met me already. By selecting one pupil from each group discussion, I hoped to be able to interview pupils who aimed for different types of educational and occupational destinations and who would draw on different underpinning discourses. The pupils were given a pseudonym, which is used in the presentation of findings (Chapter 8). The following table gives an overview of the pupils who were interviewed individually.

Participants in individual interviews

Pupil name (Pseudonym)	Year group	Attributed attainment
Sean	S5	Low
Kara	S4	Low
Michael	S4	Low
Megan	S4	Middle
Kieran	S4	Middle
Ella	S5	Low
Fiona	S4	High
Robert	S6	High
Greg	S4	High
Pauline	S6	High

Table 2 Overview of participants in individual interviews

Like the group discussions, the individual interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes and were conducted during school hours. The individual interviews were structured through the use of an interview schedule that included a number of

overarching questions and probes (see Appendix 4). As the interview was intended to elicit the young people's thinking about themselves with respect to the future, the interview started by asking the pupils to imagine their life in ten years' time. This was followed by a number of more specific questions on how the young people imagined their futures. The interview was concluded with another open question asking the young people what they regarded as most important in their lives. Since it was considered important to elicit material that was rich in associations, the young people were given the room to speak freely and invited through probes to elaborate their accounts.

Most of the young people were very forthcoming when speaking about their present and future lives, although for some, the interview situation seemed to create some discomfort. Also, the question about their imagined future life seemed difficult for some young people. This was addressed by creating an atmosphere as relaxed as possible and by encouraging the young people to speak about their interests and lives more generally. The individual interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

5.5 Ethical considerations

While there is no law with respect to ethics in the UK, each university has its own ethical guidelines with which research projects have to comply (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Furthermore, professional and academic associations have their own ethical codes to provide their members with orientation. This project was conducted according to the standards of the University of Strathclyde (2009). Before beginning the fieldwork, ethical approval was obtained from the department's ethics committee (see Appendix 11). Furthermore, the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) were consulted (2004).

Several commentators have highlighted that ethical guidelines for social research are closely linked to those developed in medical research (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Gallagher, 2009a; Homan, 1991). While most authors accept that official ethical codes and guidelines provide necessary orientation, they highlight that they can be

problematic because they are not sensitive to the research context and because they can reduce ethical considerations to fulfilling a set of criteria at the outset of the study (Mason, 2002; Gallagher, 2009a). It is argued that ethical practice is an ongoing, reflective and context specific process (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002). In this study, different types of ethical dilemmas and considerations were encountered at different stages in the research process, most of which were related to the specificities of the research setting and the fact that young people were involved in the study.

Gallagher (2009a) concludes that childhood studies converge to a large extent with other social research in highlighting informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality as key ethical principles. Although most ethical principles apply to young people and adults likewise, there are some specific considerations to be made when conducting research with children and young people (Hill, 2005). They are mainly informed by two assumptions. It is firstly assumed that children's capacities to understand the research process and its implications may not be as fully developed as adults'. Secondly, authors have pointed out that the unequal power balance between adults and children puts children in a position of less authority to make decisions about their involvement in research (ibid). Based on these assumptions, two areas have to be carefully considered, that of choice and consent, and that of potential harm (France, 2004).

5.5.1 Informed consent
An ethical principle that is widely accepted is that of gaining informed consent from prospective research participants – be they adults or children (Hill, 2005). In Scotland, the regulations prescribe that young people above the age of 12 are regarded as able to give consent to participating in a research study (ibid.). Although it is sometimes assumed that parental consent is necessary, the legal position suggests that young people are able to decide about participation if they have the capacity to fully understand the consequences this entails (France, 2004; Hill, 2005). As it is the case with adults, it is a widely accepted that this entails providing prospective participants with information on the nature, purpose and possible

consequences of their participation (Gallagher, 2009a). Moreover, the participants are to be made aware that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without consequences (British Educational Research Association, 2004).

Based on these considerations, both the teachers and the pupils interviewed in this study were provided with an information sheet, which described the purpose of the study, explained what would happen to the collected data, ensured confidentiality and anonymity and highlighted that it was possible withdraw from taking part at any time (see Appendix 5). After explaining the information verbally to the prospective participants and giving them the opportunity to ask questions, they were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix 6).

It is widely recognised that when conducting research with children and young people, truly informed consent can be difficult to ascertain (France, 2004; Gallagher, 2009a; Hill, 2005;). This is due to several reasons. Firstly, children and young people might have difficulties in understanding the aims and implications of the research, and secondly, because, even though they are considered autonomous agents, their decisions are often shaped by peers and adult gatekeepers (ibid.).The young people involved in this study were of an age at which it was assumed that they were able to understand the aims and implications of the research. Nevertheless, care was given to explain the research in simple language and to make sure the pupils understood what was meant by anonymity and confidentiality.

Ensuring that opting out of the study was a real choice for the young people proved a challenging issue in this study. As the interviews were organised by a teacher, consent had to be gained at the beginning of the interview and group discussion, which provided little time for the participants to consider their participation. Furthermore, as the interviews took place during the school day, it was supposedly difficult for the young people to refuse to take part. The dilemma between having to adapt to the rules of the school and ascertaining fully informed consent could not be fully resolved. Although there was no incidence in which the young person refused to take part in an interview, this does not necessarily mean that considered consent

was given. Therefore, extra care was given in handling information confidentially and avoiding harm (see Section 5.5.2).

Gaining informed consent from individuals for observations can prove difficult, in particular in situations where large numbers of individuals are observed (Mason, 2004). In this study, observations of events such as assemblies had to be conducted without consent of each individual pupil or teacher. This also meant that the individuals involved were not always aware that they were being observed. The observation was therefore similar to "covert" observations, which have been controversially discussed in the literature on social research ethics (Bulmer, 1982; Homan, 1991). In this study, it was decided that these kinds of observations were important for answering the research question on how aspiration was enacted in the school and could be justified because they were not expected to cause harm (Angrosino, 2005). The intrusion into the pupils' and teachers' privacy, which these observations implied to some extent, was seen as not considerably problematic, as the interactions took place in a quasi-public space and observations were not focussed on specific individuals.

For activities which were attended by smaller numbers of pupils, consent was sought on a verbal basis. Before the start of the activity, the teacher announced my presence and explained the broad aim of my research. I explained to the pupils that they could opt out of being observed individually. It is acknowledged that it was difficult for the young people to opt out in this situation. Therefore, an effort was made to conduct the observations as transparent as possible by reminding pupils that I was observing, making overt notes and letting children read these notes if they wanted to (Gallagher, 2009b). Further strategies of gaining consent from pupils in a classroom situation have been suggested in the literature (Gallagher, 2009a), but were not seen as suitable for this study which was not conducted in one classroom over a longer period of time.

As in this study the groups of pupils observed varied, it was not seen feasible to gain consent from every individual pupil. This created a dilemma that could not be fully

resolved. A partial justification is given through the focus on the observations. As they were targeted at capturing manifestations of discourse rather than individual behaviour, they can be considered as less sensitive. However, there remained a sense of unease for me as a researcher (Mason, 2002).

5.5.2 Avoiding harm

Avoiding physical and emotional harm is one of the guiding principles of ethical research. The guidelines by the British Educational Research Association (2004) state that:

> *Researchers must recognize that participants may experience distress or discomfort in the research process and must take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusions and put them at their ease. They must, immediately desist from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that cause emotional or other harm. (p. 7)*

The potential for physical harm can usually be considered as low in studies outside medical research, although potential hazards due to the physical environment in which the research is conducted have to be considered (France, 2004; Hill, 2005). As the research in this study was conducted inside the school building, the danger of physical harm was low. Emotional harm can be caused when tackling sensitive topics in an interview (France, 2004; Mason, 2002). Since, in this study, the young people were asked questions about their prospective lives, there was a possibility that the young people would bring up issues that caused them distress, such as their family situation or experiences due to poverty. Therefore, I made sure not to include explicit interview questions on these topics. It was assumed that broader questions would give the young people the choice of which issues they wanted to raise. If the young people brought up topics that seemed to distress them, this was handled sensitively and further probing was avoided (Hill, 2005). I also carried phone numbers of help lines that could be given to the young people in case they raised distressing issues. No incidents occurred during the fieldwork in which this was seen necessary.

While the discussed issues on avoiding harm concern the research situation, it has to be highlighted that harm can also be caused by the research findings (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Hill, 2005). This can be caused by disclosing information about the

research participants or other individuals and groups. Therefore, questions around confidentiality and anonymity are discussed next.

5.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality arise in particular in qualitative research, as it tends to include personal and holistic data (Mason, 2002; Hill, 2005). This cannot be entirely prevented through anonymising participants, as other details can make individuals and groups identifiable. In this study, the possibility had to be considered that both individuals and the school could be identified, both by insiders and outsiders. In order to ascertain the anonymity of the school, I therefore decided to give only general information about its characteristics in this thesis. Moreover, the names of events or sites in the school were changed and no photographs were included in the thesis. With regard to the pupils' and staff accounts, details that might make the person identifiable, such as information on their role in the school, were omitted or paraphrased. The pupils who participated in individual interviews were assigned a pseudonym, which will be referred to in the presentation of the findings (Chapter 8). The teacher interviews and group discussions were numbered and will be referred to as, for example, "Teacher 3", "Group 2" in the presentation of findings (Chapters 7 and 8).

While the issues discussed above regard confidentiality towards the public, problems of confidentiality between research participants also had to be considered (Hill, 2005). The possibility that a pupil would disclose information given by other participants in a group discussion had to be anticipated. This was tried to be countered by highlighting the importance of confidentiality at the beginning of the discussion, as well as reminding the participants to consider what they willing to disclose (ibid.).

The rights to confidentiality of personal data in the UK are regulated by the Data Protection Act (1998). It entitles individuals to know why their data is stored, what it is used for and to whom it is made available. It, furthermore, establishes that individuals must give consent to the disclosure of personal information and that data

must be securely stored (British Educational Research Association, 2004). In this study, the participants of group discussion and interviews were informed about the storage, use and dissemination of the information through the information sheet, which was also explained verbally (see Appendix 5). To ensure that data could not be accessed by third parties, the transcripts and consent forms generated in this study were kept in a locked drawer and electronic copies kept on a password protected computer.

5.6 Data analysis

The overall approach to data analysis draws on frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis as outlined in Section 5.2.1. In order to make different data "readable", they had to be translated into a text. This seemed more straightforward with verbal data from interviews and groups discussion, although the transcription of verbal data also has to be seen as an act of translation (Mason, 2002). The following sub-sections specify the analytical steps followed in the analysis of the different forms of data, beginning with policy documents and interviews with teachers (5.6.1), followed by the observation notes and photographs of sites (5.6.2) and the group discussions and interviews with young people (5.6.3). The last part (5.6.4) shows how the findings from these procedures were compared.

5.6.1 Analysis of policy documents and interviews with teachers
The analysis of policy documents and the interviews with teachers focused on identifying the "problematisation" of aspiration and the "discursive strategies" employed. According to Tonkiss (2004) and Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008), the basic aim of a discourse analysis is to examine the "problematisations", that is ways in which a "problem" is discursively constructed and understood. A similar aim underpins the identification of "discursive strategies", which can be understood as "ways through which the object is defined" (Carabine, 2001, p. 288).

In order to realise this overall analytic aim, Tonkiss (2004) proposes three moves, including the identification of key themes and arguments (looking for associations,

clusters of ideas around topics; how subjects are positioned and spoken about; and mobilisation of particular meanings and images); the examination of variation (contradictions, conflicting ideas); and attention to silences (issues that are omitted or rejected). This overlaps to a great extent with Willig's (2008) analytic steps, which, in addition, suggest examining "possibilities for action" and "subjective experience" and the wider discourses drawn upon in the data.

In this study, this meant that the analysis focused on how aspiration was constructed as a problem (and which solutions were offered) and how young people and other "subjects" were characterised and positioned. In order to examine the grounds on which tackling aspiration was justified, the analysis, furthermore, identified wider discourses and "higher morals", that is values and ideals, which were drawn upon in the documents and teachers' accounts. Finally, I identified contradictions and silences in the data. This required imagining what other possibilities were excluded through this particular way of constructing the text.

In order to make the analysis manageable, an analytic matrix was created. The results for each analytic dimension were included in the respective part of the grid, including quotes which illustrated the aspect. The overview provided the basis for bringing the findings from the individual texts together. This proved a complex process which was managed by following the principle of identifying the variety of assumptions made on a certain issue.

5.6.2 Analysis of observation notes and photographs of sites

The analysis of the observation notes provided a particular challenge as they comprise of a mosaic of different voices, including direct quotes, indirect quotes and reflections by myself as the researcher. Moreover, there was no example in the methods literature of how Foucaultian Discourse Analysis could be applied to observational data. An attempt was made to separate representation of the event from methodological and theoretical reflections (see Section 5.4.2) and the analysis focused on the description of observed events.

Existing frameworks had to be adapted to analyse situations in which ideas were conveyed in interaction. Assuming that the school intended to encourage the young people to think about their futures, the texts were firstly analysed for the ideas transmitted. Therefore, the messages to the young people were analysed drawing on the principles suggested by Tonkiss (2004) outlined in the previous section (5.6.1). This meant examining the ideas the young people were given about their futures for the key themes and arguments. When conducting the analysis, it seemed particularly important to look for the "logics" (that is constructions of cause and consequence), the wider discourses which underpinned these ideas (Willig, 2008) and the ways in which young people were positioned.

Furthermore, noting that the messages conveyed to the young people in the school encouraged the young people to adopt certain characteristics and actions, Willig's analytic steps of identifying "possibilities for action" and "subjectivity" were considered important. It was decided to identify "ways of being" and "acting" [7] that were suggested to the pupils. This also takes into account the assumptions around Foucault's concept of "ethics" (see Section 4.1.2), which suggests that discourses exert "moral obligations", suggesting what kind of person individuals should become ("telos") and how they should realise this ("technologies of the self"/"ethical substance").

The observation notes were read and re-read and important passages highlighted. In a next step, these passages were read along the analytic dimensions outlined above. For each event, a list of the ideas transmitted to the pupils and ways of positioning pupils was devised. These were then compared across the observations, identifying statements and practices (see Appendix 8). This led to identifying two broad ways in which pupils were encouraged to think and act upon their futures, which are described in Chapter 7.

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[7] These expressions resemble the forms of "being" and "doing" identified by Watts & Bridges (2006) in their article on working class people's constructions of valuable futures. These expressions are key dimensions of Amartya Sen's "capability approach".

The photographs of sites in the school were analysed along the same dimensions. Here, apart from linguistic expressions, imagery was considered. By interpreting what associations were evoked through the use of images and graphic elements, sometimes in combination with words, the overall message was examined. This was followed by identifying common themes and messages across the sites in the school (see Appendix 9).

5.6.3 Analysis of group discussions and interviews with young people

The analysis of the group discussions and the individual interviews with the young people provided a further challenge as discourse could not be easily identified in this type of data. This was firstly due to the fact that the young people used more informal, everyday language – what could be called "everyday discourse" in Waldschmidt et al.'s (2007) terms (see 4.2.3). The difficulty arose secondly because the young people spoke about themselves (and were encouraged to do so by my questions), which entailed that their accounts comprised less abstract reasoning in the form of a problem-solution structure. This meant that the analytic dimensions adopted for the analysis of policy documents and the interviews by staff, looking for "problematisations" could not easily be transferred.

Therefore, a more thematical analysis was conducted with young people's accounts, complemented by a discourse analytic reading. Consequently, two steps were undertaken. First, I familiarised myself with the data by repeated reading of the transcripts and highlighted passages which were regarded relevant in order to answer the research questions (Tonkiss, 2004). Then, these passages were paraphrased and grouped under topic headings. After conducting these steps with each transcript, themes across interviews were identified (see Appendix 10). Secondly, a discourse analytic reading was undertaken with each transcript. Drawing on the guidelines by Tonkiss (2004), I identified how themes and arguments were spoken about, looked for variation and identified silences.

As it was one aim of the study to identify how the young people negotiated ideas they encountered in the school, their accounts were also analysed for topics identified

in the accounts from staff or school messages. Examining how these ideas were articulated by the young people, allowed making inferences about the young people's ways of adopting, resisting/rejecting and appropriating ideas. Based on the assumption that the school messages encouraged the young people to adopt certain ways of "being" and acting" (see Section 5.6.2), the focus was on how the young people dealt with these, adopting certain subject positions employing "technologies of the self" (see also Section 4.3.3). It was also identified if and how the young people drew on ideas not present in the school to construct valuable ways of "being" and "acting".

Through discourse analytic reading, an interpretation for each transcript was produced. Synthesising these interpretations across transcripts proved a complex task. I decided to concentrate firstly on identifying ways in which ideas present in the school (identified from the observations, staff interviews and documents) were negotiated. Then, I organised the data according to how young people rendered certain forms of subjectivity and action desirable and identified which discursive elements they drew on.

5.6.4 Final comparative analysis

A challenge for the analysis was the diversity of the materials. Although scholars have suggested that a range of materials can be the basis for a discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Clarke, 2005; Rose, 2007), there is little literature on the question of whether different types of material can be analysed with the same methods and how the analysis of different materials can be integrated. Mason (2002) cautions that an integration of different data sources has to be well justified.

Clarke (2005) suggests that discourse data can be analysed either through "integrative" mapping and analysis or through "comparative" mapping and analysis. In the integrative approach, all sources are analysed together, whereas in a comparative analysis, the researcher analyses each domain separately and then compares the results. In this study, a comparative approach was adopted. As it was

the aim of the study to examine how discourse was drawn upon in different settings, it was regarded important to identify commonalities and differences.

As the different data from the different domains in this study, that is data policy, school and young people, was approached with only partly overlapping conceptual lenses, not all the results could be compared. The focus of the comparative analysis was on comparing which ideas were prominent (or absent) in each sphere and how they were articulated (that is which meanings and images they associated with). This included comparing the wider discourses drawn upon. Higher level and abstract discourses, which were more prominent in policy and at school level, were compared with discourse at the level of the young people.

5.7 Chapter summary

The discussion of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the study highlighted the dilemma between adopting a constructivist and realist approach. It was concluded that although it is assumed "reality" is constructed through discourse – and thus adopts constructivist ontology – the study is underpinned by realist assumptions insofar as it assumes that discourses are underpinned by relatively durable material and social structures. Furthermore, discourses are seen as socially shaped supra-individual structures. This also implies a realist epistemological position which assumes that these socially shaped constructions can be reconstructed by the researcher. Acknowledging, however, that the research account cannot objectively represent "reality", the importance of making the research approach transparent was highlighted. Discussing principles of legitimation, it was concluded that this research strives for "internal validity" through making consistent arguments and applying rigour in the analysis. The research findings are not regarded as generalisable to all other schools and young people, but aim to be, to some extent, transferable to similar contexts. It is also aimed to make some general claims regarding the concepts of discursive practice.

After asserting that Foucault did not develop a method, but used Archaeology and Genealogy as his "tools", it was shown that several authors have developed approaches to discourse analysis on the basis of these tools. In this thesis, both Archaeological and Genealogical principles are drawn upon and are considered important to answer the research questions. Considering that the thesis examines both policy discourse and discursive practices in a concrete setting, recent frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis were consulted. These offer analytical dimensions to study both discursive strategies in policy texts; discursive practices in institutions; and issues of subjective experience and subjectification in individual accounts.

Considering that policy is an important intermediate sphere between scientific and everyday discourse, it was decided to conduct an analysis of policy documents. A study in one school setting was then conducted, based on the assumption that it was

an "arena" where official and everyday discourse meet. Because of time constraints and the aim to capture a variety of discursive manifestations in depth, it was decided to concentrate on one school setting. The secondary school, which is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban area in Scotland, was selected because of the policy focus on socially disadvantaged young people, its focus on raising aspiration and because of its previous links with the university.

Several qualitative methods of data collection were drawn on. An analysis of policy documents was conducted, including documents in the UK from 1997 onwards, in which 'aspiration' or equivalent terms featured prominently. In the school, observations and the generation and collection of documents were considered important to capture the ways in which messages on aspiration are conveyed to the pupils. Thus, events and sites which encouraged the young people to think about their futures were captured. In order to access the subjective negotiations of ideas on aspiration, group discussions with young people and individual interviews with staff and young people were conducted. Regarding all methods, it was highlighted that although they are not seen as rendering an "objective" representation of reality, it is assumed that they provide access to discursive practices.

The ethical considerations and dilemmas that arose before and during the study were, to a great extent, related to the specific setting and the fact that young people were involved. The main principles considered were informed consent, avoiding harm and anonymity and confidentiality. Ensuring that the young people had a real choice over participating in the study was particularly challenging, given the involvement of teachers as gatekeepers and conduction of observations with large numbers of pupils. These issues could not be fully resolved, but were balanced through a focus on minimising the possibility of harm and careful protection of confidentiality and anonymity.

The data were analysed following the analytic framework by Tonkiss (2004). However, this framework was adapted to suit the characteristics of the different data sources and the focus of the research questions. For the analysis of policy documents

and accounts by staff, the problematisation of aspiration was the major focus. The observations and generated documents were mainly read for the "messages" they conveyed to the young people about desirable ways of "being" and "acting". For the group discussions and individual accounts by young people, a thematic analysis was combined with a discourse analytic reading, identifying ways in which the young people negotiated messages in the school and which discursive elements they drew on to construct ways of "being" and "acting" as desirable for themselves.

Chapter 6: Aspiration as a policy problem

This chapter presents the findings from a discourse analysis of policy documents in which 'aspiration' is a major topic. The analysis examines how aspiration is problematised in the documents. This means identifying what problems and solutions are constructed, how subjects are described and positioned, which wider discourses are drawn on and which images and metaphors are employed. Furthermore, attention will be given to contradictions and silences in the texts. This leads to identifying the moral obligations, that is the demands on action and subjectivity placed on different actors.

The first section looks at the wider debate on social and educational inequalities in which aspiration has become an important element, identifying how problems and solutions are constructed. The second section, inspired by a genealogical approach, traces how aspiration has become an "object of thought" and has adopted a specific meaning in the UK and Scottish policy discourse since 1997. Having illustrated how the policy documents construct and describe "problem groups" in the third section, the fourth section describes the solutions set out by policy. The final section relates the findings to the Foucaultian concepts of "ethics" (see Sections 4.1.2 and 4.3.3). It draws out the moral obligations placed on different actors by identifying demands on action and subjectivity. The presentation of findings is based on the analysis of 40 documents, including government documents, speeches and other communications by politicians and official reports (for an overview see Appendix 7).

6.1 Wider 'problems': Social immobility and waste of potential

'Aspiration' as a discursive object emerged in several intersecting debates in the fields of social and welfare policy, education policy, and economic/labour market policy from 1997 onwards. The common problem presented in all of these areas is the persistent link between the socio-economic position of origin, and educational and later life "outcomes". Individuals from socio-economically "disadvantaged" or "deprived" backgrounds, according to this assumption, have lower levels of

attainment and participation in education, leading to less favourable "outcomes" in the form of occupational and social status, income, health and other dimensions. Tony Blair, Prime Minister and leader of the Labour party at the time, emphasised the central role of "education" in the equation and indicated why education was important:

> *For people in the Labour party, education is not a policy but a passion. We believe it is the single biggest liberator of human potential; the gateway to equal opportunity; and the driver of future economic prosperity (Blair, 2005).*

The quote illustrates that Blair portrays "education" as a means to develop "human potential", which again leads to equal opportunity and future economic prosperity. This view of education and its importance is echoed throughout the analysed documents. When presenting the comparatively lower educational attainment and participation among individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged families as problematic, most documents lament the waste of individual "potential". This, again, is presented as posing a threat to national economic competitiveness and prosperity and as inhibiting individuals from realising positive life outcomes, which is seen as a problem of social justice or fairness.

In most documents, tackling social disadvantage is seen most importantly as a means to realising greater economic prosperity. It is asserted that global competition and new types of occupations entail the need to increase the number of highly-skilled people in the UK. Thus, according to this proposition, the human resources of all its citizens have to be made use of:

> *Global trends have a major impact on jobs, opportunities and our economy and the demand for high skills. (…) The countries which succeed will be those which make the most of the talents and potential of all their citizens, not just a narrow elite, which hinders our economic potential. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 10)*
>
> *The UK's future success in a globally competitive economy will rely on using all of our country's talent, not just some of it. (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 8)*

The quotes suggest that the success of the national economy and subsequently its prosperity depends on a higher skilled workforce. They draw on the discourses of a

knowledge-based economy and of human capital, which has to be invested in and utilised by the state. The consequence of this necessity drawn in the documents is to develop the potential of a larger proportion of the population, that is not just that of a privileged minority ("narrow elite").

The analysis also shows that there are different assumptions as to what the future occupational structure would look like. In several of his speeches former Labour leader and Prime Minister Gordon Brown painted a picture of an ideal economy in which highly-skilled jobs would be available for nearly everyone:

> *This impetus for new skilled or professional employment will provide the UK with more middle-class jobs than ever before. (Brown, 2010)*

While Brown's call for developing potential is made against the idea of an indefinite number of highly-skilled occupations, other documents explicitly or implicitly make the assumption that there will be jobs which require different levels of skills and qualifications. A report by Ipsos MORI (2007) states that "Not everyone can, or needs to, get academic qualifications (...) we need cleaners as well as brain surgeons." (p. 28) Similarly, a report by the Panel of Fair Access to the Professions asserts that developing the potential of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is required to be able to "fish in a wider pool of talent" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 8). Comparing the statements suggests that there are diverging assumptions regarding the amount of highly-skilled people needed on the labour market and regarding the question of whether the newly developed "talent" would find work adequate to their qualifications or would constitute a higher quality reserve from which employers could select.

In addition to emphasising economic prosperity, the documents present "social justice" or "fairness" as "higher aims" to be realised by tackling social disadvantage. While social disadvantage was sought to be tackled by ending "social exclusion" in Labour's earlier policies, "social mobility" was increasingly endorsed as a strategy by the Labour government in its last term in office and is continued by the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

In his speeches and articles from 2008 onwards, Gordon Brown defined social mobility as the "modern definition of social justice", as opposed to the old form of "social protection" (Brown, 2008a; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) and "the old equality of outcome that discounts hard work and effort" (Brown, 2007b, n. p.). The latter statement indicates that social justice in the form of social mobility no longer means creating equal outcomes but creating "equal opportunity" for each individual to reach any social position. Moreover, Brown's statement suggests that better outcomes for individuals should not be granted but be dependent on individual effort. Brown himself makes explicit that he draws on a meritocratic logic when pledging to create a "genuinely meritocratic Britain" (Brown, 2007b, n. p.).

Nick Clegg, the current Deputy Prime Minister, painted a similar picture when announcing the Social Mobility Strategy of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and presenting social mobility as a matter of fairness:

> *Fairness means that no one is held back by the circumstances of their birth. Fairness demands that what counts is not the school you went to or the jobs your parents did, but your ability and your ambition (Clegg, 2011, n. p.).*

The statement suggests that the idea of "fairness" is driven by a meritocratic ideal that one's position in life should not be determined by one's background ("circumstances of their birth"), but by individual talent and effort ("ability" and "ambition"). Given this understanding of "fairness", the chance to move upward in the social hierarchy is thus presented as an "ethical" duty towards the individual (Clegg, 2011), a "moral imperative" (Brown, 2008b), and "right on ethical grounds" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009).

Following on from the assumption that "fairness" can be realised by promoting social mobility, several documents construct the need to create a society where there are no obstacles to upward social mobility:

> *I don't care where you started out in life; my mission is to help you rise higher (Cameron, 2007, n. p.).*

I want a Britain where there is no cap on ambition, no ceiling on talent, no limit to where your potential will take you and how far you can rise (Brown, 2007a, n. p.).

A society in which everyone is free to flourish and rise (HM Government, 2011, p. 3).

Drawing on images of ascent and limitlessness, these excerpts paint a picture of a society in which it is possible for every individual to climb the social hierarchy. In this society, social ascent is no longer dependent on an individual's background ("where you started out in life"), but on their will ("everyone is free"), ability ("talent", "potential") and ambition. The quotes explicitly or implicitly indicate that it is the state's responsibility to remove restrictions that impede individuals from being upwardly socially mobile ("help you rise higher"; "no cap on ambition"). At the same time, it is implied that once this is realised, being socially mobile is a decision of the individual ("everyone is free"). This also implies that in order to realise a "better life", citizens are expected to take up the new opportunities created for them, although this is not always stated as explicitly as in the following:

Social mobility relies on individual drive and ambition (…) if the job of the government is to create more chances for people to get on, it is the job of the citizen to grab those chances (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 40).

It can be seen that an individual's aspiration to be upwardly socially mobile ("individual drive and ambition") is seen as a necessary prerequisite for social mobility to be realised. By referring to the will to "grab those chances", the above statement suggests that social ascent is ultimately the responsibility of the individual citizen. The debate on tackling disadvantage through social mobility thus sees the role of the state in removing restrictions, yet placing the expectation and responsibility on citizens to desire and realise social ascent.

This section has shown that the wider policy discourse in which aspiration has become a relevant object which constructs social disadvantage as a "problem" in two respects. Firstly, social disadvantage is presented as a threat to the economic prosperity of the nation and, secondly, as an obstacle which inhibits individuals from realising good life outcomes, which is made problematic in terms of social justice or

fairness. Underpinning the presentation of economic prosperity as a higher moral is a discourse of the "knowledge economy", which sees the need for a more highly-skilled workforce and thus demands the development of individual "potential" in a larger part of the population. With regard to the higher moral of social justice, a meritocratic discourse could be identified, which constructs social justice or fairness as a matter not of equal outcomes, but of equal opportunity to be upwardly socially mobile. It furthermore regards the social position of individuals as dependent on their ability and effort, that is their individual, internal merits, rather than social background factors.

It can be concluded that the "solution" to the problems of economic prosperity and social justice is seen in creating social mobility by developing "potential" among socially disadvantaged groups through acquiring higher qualifications. Social mobility seems to be presented as a solution to the situation of new demands of an economy in need of a more highly-skilled workforce, as well as the old problem that an individual's social position is determined by his or her background. It can be concluded that the two "higher morals" of social justice and economic prosperity are conflated in the policy strategy of improving social mobility.

The analysis shows that the rhetoric on social mobility is linked to the idea of a society in which every individual has "equal opportunity" to be upwardly socially mobile. By evoking images of a society free from barriers to social ascent, a shared responsibility of the state and the citizens is assumed: while the state creates the opportunities by removing restrictions to social ascent, the citizens are supposed to take up these opportunities. The "subjects" of the debate, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, are presented as in need to be freed from barriers, while, at the same time, called upon to be willing to ascend socially. Thus, the debate places the ultimate responsibility for a good life on the individual.

When considering what is rejected and silenced in the debate, it can be concluded that by presenting social mobility as a new form of social justice, tackling inequality is no longer seen as creating equal living circumstances, but creating opportunities

for individual citizens to acquire a better life through ascending in the social hierarchy. This suggests that "social justice" and "fairness" are presented as justice between individuals rather than social groups and are thus individualised. Also, the policy documents use the term "social mobility" only to describe *upward* social mobility. Social inequality is not envisaged to be tackled by changing social relations, structures or living conditions, but by allowing disadvantaged individuals to escape their circumstances, mainly by climbing the social ladder. A meritocratic discourse which was identified to underpin the debate, which implies that individuals cannot take their social position and life outcomes for granted but that they have to earn them. Thus, life outcomes are linked to internal intellectual and attitudinal resources of an individual.

As indicated in the need to create a more highly-skilled population, the debate places improvements in educational attainment and qualifications at the centre of tackling social disadvantage through improved social mobility. In the analysed documents, education seems to be seen as important in two ways. Firstly, improving educational outcomes is seen as way of developing "human potential" and so fulfilling the need for a more highly-skilled workforce. Secondly, it is seen as the major strategy to create "equal opportunity", as it allows individuals to realise better outcomes. The focus on education as a mode of creating more social mobility can be seen as the context in which aspiration of young people emerges as a discursive object. The next section illustrates how 'aspiration' emerged as a major explanation for young people's unequal levels of educational attainment and participation.

6.2 The emergence of aspiration as a discursive object

A focus in the debate described above is the improvement of educational outcomes of young people, which is reflected both in documents on school reform and in documents on transition from school to post-16 education and other "destinations". In the first group of documents, the Schools White Papers since 2001 all present the lower attainment of young people from socio-economically "disadvantaged" backgrounds as compared to their more advantaged counterparts as a problem and

consequently set out to "narrow the gap" between the two groups (Department for Education, 2010; Department for Education and Employment, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2001, 2005).

The second body of documents problematises the relatively low transition rates of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to post-16 education, particularly to Higher Education. It includes documents which set out the aim to widen participation in Higher Education (Department for Business, Education and Skills 2011; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, 2006) and documents which present measures to improve post-16 participation in education and training (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a, 2005a, 2007) or to reduce the proportion of young people "Not in Education, Employment or Training" (NEET) (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Scottish Executive, 2006).

In policy documents before the mid 2000s the term 'aspiration' was mainly used to describe young people's life aims more generally. The Education White Papers from 1997 and 2001, for example, asserted that every young person had individual aspirations which were supposed to be met by educational measures (see Department for Education and Employment, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 1997, 2001). "Aspiration" was thus a general, unproblematic feature of individuals.

From the early 2000s onwards, an increase in the use of the term 'aspiration' can be noted in documents both in education policy and other policy areas[8]. The term 'aspiration' was also given more prominence, as the statement in the foreword to the 2005 White Paper shows: "More than anything it is a White Paper about aspiration" (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b, p. 5). Furthermore "raising aspiration" appears to be rendered a key objective in efforts to widen participation in Higher

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[8] These policy areas include poverty and child poverty (see, for example, Department for Work and Pensions, 2006; Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Education, 2011; HM Treasury, Department for Work and Pensions, & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008); social exclusion (see, for example, Blair, 2006); and economic policy (see for example Brown, 2008a). The analysis in this study concentrates on the problematisation of aspiration in education policy.

Education (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b; Department for Work and Pensions, 2006) and career guidance in schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2010). In the late 2000s, 'aspiration' became the prime focus of Discussion Papers, such as Aspiration and Attainment amongst Young People in Deprived Communities (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) and reports, such as Unleashing Aspiration (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009), as well as interventions, such as The Extra Mile project (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) and the Inspiring Communities programme (Communities and Local Government, 2011).

The increased prominence of the term 'aspiration' goes alongside a change in the way aspiration is understood and used in the documents. From the early 2000s, 'aspiration' is increasingly mentioned as an element that mediates between the socio-economic position of individuals, their educational success and their later life outcomes, both in documents on school policy and documents on post-16 participation. In reviewed documents on Higher Education policy, the 2003 White Paper The Future of Higher Education seems to be the first which presents aspiration as an important element that needs to be tackled in order to increase participation in Higher Education. Drawing on research evidence, the 2006 White Paper Widening participation in Higher Education, explicitly presents 'aspiration' as a factor that influences educational participation:

> *Recent research suggests that non-educational factors such as pupils' aspirations account for about 25 per cent of the difference in the likelihood of high and low socio-economic groups staying on to do A levels, the traditional entry route to higher education. The size of this effect increases to as much as 50 per cent if we also consider the difference aspirations make to pupils' achievement at GCSE. (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, p. 11)*

Although not drawing on research evidence, the 2005 Schools White Paper makes similar assumptions on the importance of aspiration as a mediating factor by referring to "cycles of underachievement, low aspiration and educational underperformance" (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b, p. 20).

The discussion paper Aspiration and Attainment amongst Young People in Deprived Communities, published in 2008 (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), by contrast, deploys scientific evidence from a variety of sources to establish the importance of aspiration as a factor. This document, and the evidence it presents, is again cited in subsequent government documents (see Cabinet Office, 2008; HM Government, 2009). These present aspirations as influencing educational attainment, participation in Higher Education and "life outcomes":

> *Young people's aspirations – the goals they set for the future, their inspiration and their motivation to work towards these goals – have a significant influence both on their educational attainment and their future life outcomes (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 5).*

> *The root cause of low representation in higher education by certain groups is most likely due to poor prior attainment and the development of lower aspirations before the age of 16 (Cabinet Office, 2008, p. 75).*

These quotes show how 'aspiration' is identified as a factor that influences later life outcomes and that low aspiration among "certain groups" leads to lower levels of participation in Higher Education. This suggests firstly that aspiration is constructed as a discrete category, which has the power to explain causal relationships.

Secondly, as the term "lower aspirations" suggests, aspiration is seen as an entity which is measurable and which is held by young people in different amounts. This tendency to regard aspiration as a measurable entity is not only evident in the use of composites such as "high aspirations" versus "low aspirations" (see Cabinet Office, 2011; Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), but also in the expression "poverty of "aspiration"[9] which was increasingly referred to in the political debate from the mid 2000s (see, for example, Blair, 2006; Brown, 2007b; Cabinet Office, 2011). This is, moreover, suggested by the need to "raise", "stretch" and " unlock" aspiration among young people (see, for

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[9] The origin of the term "poverty of aspiration" is attributed to Aneurin Bevan, Deputy Leader of the Labour party in the late 1950s (Butler & Hamnett, 2011, p. 91; Riddell, 2010a). It was brought back into the debate by Tony Blair (ibid.) and used by Gordon Brown in his first speech to the Labour conference as party Leader (Brown, 2007b).

example, Department for Education and Skills, 2005b, 2006; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009).

Alongside the emergence of aspiration as an explanatory factor, aspiration seems to have been attributed a more specific meaning in the reviewed documents since the early 2000s. The document "Aspiration and Attainment amongst Young People in Deprived Communities" defines "young people's aspirations" as the "goals they [young people] set for the future, their inspiration and their motivation to work towards these goals" (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 5). This shows that 'aspiration' is used both as an equivalent expression for future goals and a motivational quality in individuals. As the previous quotes indicate, however, having aspirations or having high aspirations tends not to be linked to any future goal but to a desire to attain highly in school and pursue higher level qualifications and highly-skilled occupations. In conjunction with this, 'aspiration' is also seen as an orientation towards being upwardly socially mobile, as the following statement by the Panel of Fair Access to the Professions suggests: "Having an aspiration to succeed is the foundation for a professional career. Without individual aspiration, social mobility simply flounders." (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 62)

It can be concluded that the identification of 'aspiration' as an explanatory factor for low levels of educational attainment and participation that is held in different amounts, aspiration, or more precisely, low levels of aspiration, have been identified as a "problem" in the policy texts. The analysis in this section therefore suggests that the shift in the use of the term 'aspiration' during the 2000s can be regarded as an instance of "problematisation" (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). 'Aspiration' appears to have became an "object of thought" (Foucault, [1984] 1989, p. 296). This problematisation takes place within the wider problematisation of social inequality in a number of different policy fields. Within this debate, aspiration seems to be used to articulate causes, reasons and solutions for the problem of perpetuation of social inequality.

As shown in Chapter 4, a problematisation is linked with the construction of certain problem groups. The following section shows which problem groups are identified and how they are described in the debate on aspiration.

6.3 Problematising attitudes and culture of disadvantaged groups

The previous section showed that from the early 2000s, 'aspiration' has increasingly been understood as a measurable factor which impacts on educational attainment and lower participation rates in Higher Education. Consequently, low levels of aspiration have been identified as a problem that needs to be tackled by policy. Most of the reviewed documents link a deficit in aspirations to young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or communities:

> *(…) the poverty of aspiration that holds back too many young people from underrepresented backgrounds. (HM Government, 2011, p. 56)*

> *It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to higher education, and whose aspirations are low, are supported both in achieving their full potential (…). (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, p. 69).*

> *This project is about raising the aspirations of children from deprived communities, and engaging them in their education. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 3)*

> *To help those [sic] disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their aspirations (…) (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 22).*

Although using different expressions to refer to young people's backgrounds, and variably emphasising community or family background, the quotes show that low aspirations are linked with socio-economic disadvantage. Only one document could be identified which sees 'aspiration' as a problem of middle-class young people, who see their aspirations "blocked" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). The report makes a distinction between the majority of the population, "most hard-working families", who see their aspirations "blocked" and "those youngsters and families who simply do not believe that they will ever progress" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 7). Thus, the report attributes "low aspirations" to a small minority. By contrasting them with the "hard-working" families, low aspirations are implicitly linked to the most disadvantaged (that is unemployed)

groups. Thus, the document constructs the more advantaged families as victims of unfair structures, whereas those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are characterised as having attitudinal deficits.

Although most reviewed documents attribute low aspiration to young people with a socio-economically disadvantaged background, other groups are also seen as needing to have their aspirations raised. These groups include young people from black and minority ethnic groups (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, 2005b), as well as young people with a disability and looked after children (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Furthermore, some of the documents see low levels of aspiration as a problem of intersecting dimensions of gender, class and ethnicity. They either assert that white young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and white boys in particular, have "lower educational aspirations and attainment than most other ethnic groups" (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 8) or describe black boys/young black men, in particular those from low income families as prone to have low aspirations (HM Government, 2011; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007).

When describing the problems arising from the young people's deficit in aspiration, the reviewed documents tend to portray low aspirations, alongside other attributes and dispositions, as an attitudinal or cultural barrier which restricts young people from fully developing and tapping their innate "potential":

> *(…) limited expectations, low self-confidence and low ambitions can sometimes stop young people from doing as well as they could. (Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 5)*

> *(…) one barrier was that young people did not have the skills and knowledge to set and reach goals. This can lead to a level of defeatism or unrealistic expectations. (Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 20)*

> *In some deprived communities, as well as economic disadvantage, lower expectations and low self-esteem can hold people back. (HM Government, 2009, p. 10)*

> *Cultural or economic barriers limit expectations and stop the brightest young people in some communities from fulfilling their potential. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 11)*

Children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier than material poverty. It is the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 2)

The quotes show that 'aspiration' is regarded an internal obstacle which restricts young people ("holds back", "stop", "barrier") from being educationally successful. The latter two quotes indicate other, material and economic barriers exist, however, in the latter quote these are seen as less relevant than the "cultural barrier" of "low aspirations". The quotes also indicate that deficits in aspiration tend to be mentioned in conjunction with other negative attitudinal attributes.

The attributes identified in the documents associated with low levels of aspiration include negative self-concept, such as a "lack of confidence" or "self-esteem" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007, 2008); passive/negative outlook towards the future, manifested in "fatalism", "defeatism" or a "sense of acceptance" (Communities and Local Government, 2011; Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008); insufficient self-management skills, such as lack of ability to set goals or knowledge of how to achieve them (Communities and Local Government, 2011; Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) and a negative stance towards education and success, referring to "scepticism about education" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) or to "limited faith in the education system" (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). 'Aspiration' is either presented alongside or interchangeably with these attitudinal factors or as an overarching quality that is composed of other attitudes, as indicated in this document:

Inspiration, information, self-esteem and self-efficacy are all important components of high aspirations (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 10).

The tendency of the documents to emphasise attitudinal barriers suggests that the "problem" of unequal educational outcomes is mainly located in the young people's

attitudinal dispositions, including aspiration, although there is variation regarding the extent to which attitudes such as aspiration are presented as absent in young people or only restricted. Furthermore, the focus on attitudes also indicates an implicit assumption that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds possess innate ability which needs to be "freed" in order to realise better educational outcomes.

In the reviewed documents, the origin of attitudinal deficits seems to be seen as a consequence of young people's socio-economic position, manifest in the structural and cultural attributes of families and neighbourhoods. Economic deprivation tends to be mentioned as an indirect barrier, which impacts on young people through the attitudes and culture they encounter in their environment. In some documents the way disadvantage impacts on the aspirations of young people is made more explicit, identifying poverty across several generations and high levels of unemployment as reasons for low levels of aspiration towards education and employment:

> *(…) generational poverty adds to material deprivation the weight of historical expectation and ingrained culture. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 2).*
>
> *Professionals emphasised the influence of community attitudes, including a culture of worklessness on young people's aspirations. (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 36)*
>
> *Communities where large numbers of people are out of work face a range of social problems. Aspirations tend to be lower. (HM Government, 2009, p. 98)*

The statements suggest that the impact of poverty and disadvantage on aspiration is seen as mediated through phenomena such as worklessness and inter-generational poverty, which, again, are described as causing cultural deficits (first quote) or being a cultural phenomena in themselves (second quote).

Parents are generally seen as an important or even the most important influence on their children's development and thus their educational outcomes (see, for example, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; HM Government, 2009; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Particularly the parents' attitudes towards education and aspirations for their children are presented as important factors

impacting on young people's attainment and their own attitudes. Some documents stress that not all parents in disadvantaged communities have "low aspirations" for their children" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009) or that "[N]early all parents have positive general aspirations for their children" (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 10). Nevertheless, all reviewed documents identified at least some families as problematic:

> *For children, experience of life in a workless family is associated with lower educational attainment and reduced aspiration to gain employment themselves. (Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Education, 2011, p. 15)*

> *In some families the culture is fatalistic – parents pass on the idea that their status is relatively fixed. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 25).*

> *Some families are both cynical and suspicious of school. Parents may have had bad experiences of their own at school, and this rubs off on their children. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 3)*

> *Parental aspirations are tremendously important in helping children to succeed, but it is difficult for parents to set high aspirations for their children if their own experiences have led them not to place much value on education and training and to expect little for themselves and their children in terms of sustained, rewarding employment. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 25)*

The quotes suggest that these parents are described as negatively influencing young people's attitudes towards educational achievement, employment and upward social mobility. Firstly, as suggested in the first quote, worklessness in families is seen as reducing aspiration to gain work in young people. And secondly, as the other three quotes highlight, parents' negative attitudes are seen as being transmitted ("pass on"; "rub off") to young people. These attitudes include negative attitudes towards education, ("cynical"; "suspicious") and low expectations of gaining employment ("expect little") and upward social mobility ("fatalistic", see their status "as relatively fixed"). Thus, parents are portrayed as responsible for instilling negative attitudes in young people, although their attitudes are also regarded as influenced by external circumstances, such as their own bad experiences.

Next to problematising young people and parents, recent documents on aspiration have a focus on the role neighbourhoods play in the transmission of disadvantage and low levels of aspiration. Most documents distinguish between different types of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Local communities which have experienced industrial decline and are inhabited by a white working class population are presented as particularly problematic (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). It is stated that living in these areas has an influence on young people's aspirations through the influence of peers or negative attitudes rooted in the population more generally:

> *And the disadvantages associated with deprivation are reinforced in some communities by attitudinal barriers: low expectations, a lack of self-belief and a fear of the unknown. (HM Government, 2009, p. 92)*

> *A lack of local role models and negative perceptions about the benefits of education have been reducing some young people's ideas of success in the local community (Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 25).*

The quotes suggest that young people are influenced by attitudinal barriers, entrenched in the community as a whole. Furthermore, aspirations seem to be negatively influenced by the absence of people who could be emulated ("role models"). In some documents, low levels of aspiration at a community level are linked to cultural and structural characteristics of these communities:

> *In some deprived communities, stable populations and close-knit social networks combine with a sense of isolation from broader social connections and economic opportunities. This can limit young people's horizons and aspirations for the future (HM Government, 2009, p. 95).*

> *Close knit local social networks, low population mobility and a history of economic decline appear to characterise neighbourhoods where young people are less likely to develop high educational aspirations. (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 15)*

The quotes evoke the image of these disadvantaged communities being restricted and isolated both in a social, geographical and metaphorical sense. They suggest that social closeness and isolation restrict young people's knowledge of and will to pursue futures which are beyond the local ("limit young people's horizons").

This section has demonstrated that, from the mid 2000s, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly ascribed a deficit in aspiration in the reviewed documents. 'Aspiration', used either as a shorthand for a range of attitudes underpinning educational success or alongside other attributes, is presented as a major barrier which restricts young people from developing their inner ability and thus prevents them from being educationally successful. Overall, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to be attributed a position of being victims of circumstances which impact negatively on their attitudes towards educational attainment and thus hold them back from achieving better life outcomes or being socially mobile. At the same time, they are, at least implicitly, portrayed as having innate ability, which they need to realise though adopting more positive attitudes.

The reviewed documents locate the origins of the young people's attitudinal deficits mainly in their families and communities, which are ascribed negative attitudinal and cultural attributes, such as low expectations of education, fatalism and low confidence. By presenting these attributes as being transmitted to the young people, disadvantaged families and communities are attributed a position of being responsible for "low aspirations" in young people, although they are, at least in some of the reviewed documents, portrayed as victims themselves.

Although the documents present attitudinal and cultural characteristics as negatively impacting on young people, these characteristics are also seen as consequences of economic, structural and social circumstances. These circumstances, however, are mainly identified at the level of families and communities, presenting characteristics, such as strong social bonds and isolation of deprived neighbourhoods, entrenched worklessness and generational poverty as responsible for low aspirations. By regarding these characteristics as translating into a culture of negative behaviours and attitudes, it can be concluded that disadvantage is culturalised.

Attributing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as their families and communities, with a deficit in aspiration and other negative attitudes can, moreover, be seen as attributing reasons for educational inequalities to the psyche of

individuals. However, this tendency was found to be linked more strongly to particularly problematic groups, in particular white British and black Caribbean boys from low-income families and de-industrialised, close-knit communities. Although being ascribed a deficit in attitudes, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are also presented as potentially able to be educationally successful. Consequently, policy aim to address the cultural and attitudinal barriers young people face. The next section illustrates which solutions are set out in policy documents and how these can be understood as a call on the young people to change.

6.4 'Solutions': Promoting 'high aims' and tackling attitudes

The previous section illustrated that most documents depicted young people facing barriers which hindered them from high attainment in education and participation in post-16 education. Consequently, these documents set out the aim of freeing young people from these restrictions and thus allow them to develop their innate potential. This is expressed in statements such as "we must tackle low expectations and help young people to raise their aspirations and unlock their talents" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 10), "Effective schools help their pupils to break free from these [cultural] limitations" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 25) or "We want young people (…) to overcome the barriers that may be preventing them from realising their talents" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 9), and in titles of documents, such as Unleashing Aspiration (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009) or Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers (HM Government, 2011).

As barriers are described either as external, that is manifested in a lack of opportunity or as internal, that is finding expression in young people's attitudes towards educational and later life success, different strategies aiming at removing barriers are suggested. Documents which tackle the topic of widening access to Higher Education or the professions mention that structural barriers, which hinder young people from entering these destinations, have to be removed (see, for example, HM Government, 2009) and call on universities and the professions to "open their doors

to a wider cohort of students" (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, pp. 7, 65). The call to remove barriers to access is usually paired with the idea of tackling barriers resulting from the students' backgrounds, as can be seen in the following quote:

> *It is as much about family networks as it is careers advice, individual aspiration as school standards, university admission procedures as well as career development opportunities. (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p. 7)*

The quote suggests that a need to tackle structures in the education system ("admission procedures", "school standards") is combined with changing features of families and inner qualities of young people ("aspiration"). In all the documents, the removal of the individual young person's internal barriers is mentioned with different degrees of prominence. Next to improving attainment, the reviewed documents identify a need to raise aspiration in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

While raising aspiration is identified as one aim among others in documents on general school reform, it is presented as a key strategy and principle in documents concerned with career guidance and widening participation in Higher Education (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, 2006; Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2010). The 2009 strategy document on the reform of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) asserts that "excellent IAG excites young people about their future lives and raise[s] their aspirations about what they can achieve." (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 10) The Higher Education White Paper from 2006 presents raising aspiration as one of the "actions" undertaken to widen participation besides improving attainment and reviewing the admissions system (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

Furthermore, the Labour Government initiated a number of interventions specifically designed to raise aspirations among young people in schools and local communities. These included the Extra Mile project, aimed at "raising aspirations of children from deprived communities and engaging them in their education" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 3), and the Inspiring Communities

programme which sought to "empower local communities to take action to help their young people raise their ambitions and achievement at school", running projects "that set out to change people's attitudes and the way they think about others and themselves" (Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 4).

This shows that while the ultimate aim is to raise young people's aspirations and achievement at school, some measures target young people themselves, predominantly through initiatives at schools, and other measures seek to make an indirect impact through changing attitudes at a community level. This suggests that the starting point and responsibility for raising aspirations is on the one hand located in the educational sphere and on the other hand in local areas. The aims set out by the Inspiring Communities programme suggest a contradictory way of positioning people in disadvantaged communities: by envisaging them as being "empowered" to raise aspiration, they are constructed as active, but by suggesting that their behaviour needs to be changed, it is implies that they are passive objects of the intervention.

In order to help young people to "develop" and "articulate" aspirations (Communities and Local Government & Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009), most documents suggest a need for information and guidance. Providing information is firstly seen as a measure to widen the scope of possible aims young people might consider:

> *Action planning (...) encourages learners to articulate their aspirations and interests and so increases their psychological scope and number of options they might consider. (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2010, p. 13)*

> *Effective schools provide a wide range of activities to broaden their pupils' horizons. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 22)*

The image of "broaden horizons" used in the second quote suggest that young people are limited in their ability to imagine a range of possible future pathways and resonates with the description of disadvantaged communities as geographically, socially and mentally isolated and limited (see Section 6.3). The assumption of young people being mentally limited is stated explicitly in the first quote ("psychological scope").

In addition to encouraging young people to consider a greater *breadth* of future aims, guidance and information seems to be seen as a way of incentivising them to adopt *higher* aims, such as Higher Education and professional occupations. In order to render these aims attractive, most documents set out plans to create personal experiences through work experience, university visits, and contact with students and professionals:

> *Excellent IAG can help develop high aspirations by enabling young people to experience at first hand a range of careers and by providing peer support and mentoring that challenge negative stereotypes. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 27)*

> *Visits, undergraduate mentoring, summer schools and a range of often imaginative and innovative links between schools, colleges and universities can all help young people and their parents to gain a full appreciation of the benefits of HE. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 37)*

> *We are keen to test some innovative approaches to partnerships through workshops, mentoring, taster courses, and in some schools, close involvement with higher education staff in schools with low progression to higher education so that parents and pupils come to see higher education as a natural choice. (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b, p. 70)*

> *Activities such as class visits to university, mentoring of young people by undergraduates, Summer Schools and masterclasses help young people to gain a first hand account of university life and to see that higher education is an achievable and realistic goal. (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 11)*

> *These schemes [The internship programmes announced by the Coalition government] will give students a real start in life by not only providing skills and experiences that they can draw on when looking for jobs but the programmes will broaden their horizons and raise their aspirations (Cabinet Office, 2011).*

The quotes illustrate the assumption that experiencing potential destinations can entice young people to take them up because they would appear achievable ("achievable", "realistic", "natural choice") and desirable. The first and second quotes, moreover, explicitly or implicitly state that young people have negative or uninformed attitudes towards Higher Education ("stereotypes", "gain a full appreciation") which need to be corrected through positive experiences with and knowledge of Higher Education and its benefits.

Besides providing young people with experiences of Higher Education and work, some documents set out the strategy of facilitating contact with occupationally successful people. In this vein, the Extra Mile project suggested a student ambassador scheme, assuming that: "providing young people with role models, often young people who have been successful in developing their careers, can provide a powerful message (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 22). The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009) proposed a national mentoring scheme, suggesting "mentoring by young professionals can inspire and encourage students" (p. 54).[10] The current Coalition government employed a similar rhetoric when announcing their initiatives Inspiring the Future and Speakers for Schools in 2011. The core of the initiatives is to provide schools with "high profile inspirational speakers" (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 56). All these initiatives seem to be underpinned by an idea that contact with socially successful individuals can instil an internal desire and drive in young people to pursue highly socially valued educational and occupational destinations. By assuming the need for role models, it is suggested that young people lack appropriate influences in their environment.

In addition to encouraging young people to envisage a wider variety of – including higher – educational and occupational destinations, most documents assert that young people's attitudes and behaviours need to be improved in order to enable them to take up and purse these aims. As shown above, attitudes of young people were sought to be addressed not only directly but also via changing attitudes and behaviours in families and communities.

One type of attitude identified in the reviewed documents as to be tackled is the young people's stance towards learning, attainment, and participation in post-16 education or success more generally. This is manifest, for example, in the report by the Panel for Fair Access to the Professions which suggests the reform of the Gifted and Talented programme to help young people to develop "the right attitude to success" (p. 53). A further example can be found in the document on the Extra Mile

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[10] Mentoring was also a part of the AimHigher programme and was planned to be rolled out more widely by the Labour government (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009).

project which sets out the aim to "develop a culture of achievement in school." (p. 25). While these documents envisage influencing young people directly, the Inspiring Communities programme sought to instil a will to "succeed" at a community level via creating

> *(…) Inspiring Communities, places where schools, businesses, local agencies, parents and the wider community all believe that their young people can succeed and where they can work together to help them achieve their aspirations. (HM Government, 2009, p. 96)*

Besides suggesting that disadvantaged young people and communities need to be instilled a will of and belief in success, the documents appear to promote a distinct version of success, equating it with educational achievement and, at least implicitly, upward social mobility.

As the previous quote indicated by referring to create "belief" in success, it is assumed that young people and communities need to acquire a more positive notion of themselves. This assumption could be identified in a majority of texts, which refer to the need to raise young people's "confidence" or "self-esteem" (Communities and Local Government, 2011; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; 2009; HM Government, 2009; 2011). In the description of the Extra Mile project, the focus on improving young people's self-concept is particularly pronounced. Among the expected project outcomes are: "reduced sense of deprivation", "increased expectations of success and self-belief" and "increased self-esteem" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, pp. 10-11).

In addition to aims of improving young people's notions of themselves, behaviours, skills and dispositions necessary for educational success are addressed in strategies of raising aspiration. These includes dispositional attributes such as "increased motivation" and "raised morale and interest levels" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 11), behaviours such as "better attention and behaviour in lessons" (ibid., p. 10) and skills with respect to future planning such the ability to "make the link between effort, attainment and future prospects" (ibid., p. 11). In this vein, the "raising aspiration" workshop module for career guidance staff

suggests working on "Motivational interviewing; Assertiveness training; Positive self-talk; Improved target setting / goal setting training (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2010, p. 14).

The proposed measures on improving young people's attitudes, skills and behaviours suggest the assumption that it is not only necessary to promote success, but that young people need to be given the ability to adopt and pursue it. This assumption is made explicit in the document on the Inspiring Communities programme, which emphasised the need for people to be enabled to take up existing "opportunities":

> *We will develop new opportunities and, crucially, work to build up the confidence and motivation that young people and their families need to take up what is already on offer. (Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 10)*

The need to make young people and their families willing to take up opportunities presented to them by the state resonates with the tendency to responsibilise individuals for their societal success that was identified in Section 6.1. However, it also suggests a need for the public hand to instil the underpinning attitudes that enable people to take responsibility and use the chances offered to them.

The analysis presented in this section suggests that the analysed documents on aspiration see the "solution" for improving the educational outcomes of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in removing external and internal barriers. It was found that besides removing (external) barriers to access, the strategies set out in the documents target young people's – and their families' and communities' – internal barriers, that is their attitudes and dispositions towards educational and occupational success. By making destinations such as Higher Education and professional destinations attractive and by tackling attitudes, self-concept, skills and behaviours, it is hoped to instil both a will and the ability to pursue these destinations.

The rhetoric used in the documents suggests that young people, as well as their families and communities need to be strengthened, mobilised and activated in order to overcome barriers, expand their (geographical and mental) "horizons" and realise

better lives. Thus, these young people, families and communities are positioned as subjects who are in need of change, while, at the same time, they are positioned as in need of being helped by the state to realise this change. This suggests a tension between being positioned as an active agent and being the object of intervention. It can thus be concluded that these individuals are prescribed agency, but denied the possibility of deciding if and how they want to change (themselves and the circumstances).

The tendency in the documents to encourage young people and communities to adopt behaviours and attitudes that lead to success implies, firstly, that their characteristics are deficient or inadequate, rendering, for example, strong community ties a negative attribute. Secondly, Higher Education and highly-skilled occupational professions are equated with success, which makes other occupations or lifestyles less legitimate. Moreover, by suggesting that adopting these aims leads to overcoming disadvantage, the responsibility for a good life is placed on the individual (see also Section 6.1). The focus on improving inner attitudes and dispositions implies that potential "solutions" located outside individuals, that is in institutional or wider social and economic structures are silenced or at least muffled.

Having shown that the attitudes of the young people, as well as the attitudes of their parents and their communities, are at the heart of the aspiration debate, the following section will draw out the possibilities offered and the obligations placed on young people with regard to their actions and their thinking about their futures.

6.5 Implications of the aspiration debate

The analysis in the previous sections has demonstrated that the debate on aspiration suggests a need to remove the barriers that restrict young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from fulfilling their innate "potential", being educationally successful and thus overcoming disadvantage. This fits in with a wider debate of creating "opportunities", as well as the will in individuals to be upwardly socially mobile. In the debate on aspiration a focus on removing internal barriers was identified,

suggesting that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are restricted by negative attitudinal attributes, transmitted by the culture of their families and communities. Although this means that young people are ascribed an (attitudinal) deficit, they are also seen as having innate "potential" and thus the opportunity to overcome the conditions in which they grew up. The young people are thus positioned both as victims of their circumstances and as agents who can affect change in their lives and regarding social disadvantage more widely. The starting point for policy interventions as well as the responsibility for overcoming social disadvantage can, therefore, be seen as located in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It was shown that by problematising aspiration, the policy discourse regards removing barriers from young people not only as a task of changing structures in the education system but also a task of improving attitudes, skills and behaviours among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – also via tackling attitudes in parents and communities. A range of initiatives could be identified which aimed at instilling the wish to achieve educationally and be occupationally successful. This not only suggests that Higher Education and professional occupations are more valuable and desirable life aims than others, but also rendering their pursuit a moral obligation to young people. Implicitly, the young people are called upon to adopt a higher position in the social hierarchy.

The analysis of the policy documents identified that in order to make young people adopt and pursue "higher" destinations, their attitudes, skills and dispositions are sought to be targeted – also via changing attitudes in families and communities. The attributes presented as to be improved include attitudes towards educational and occupational success, self-concept and skills and behaviours that allowed realising educational achievement. Interpreted in the light of the concept of "ethical substance" (see Section 4.1.2) – the part individuals are called to work upon – the young people are encouraged to work on their will, attitudes and behaviours. More specifically, they are called upon to think positively about destinations such as Higher Education, develop a will to pursue them, display confidence about their

inner abilities and display behaviours that lead to educational achievement, such as motivation. This suggests that young people are called upon to overcome barriers by changing their inner selves.

Both the call to adopt "higher" aims and to change attitudes suggest that in order to reach a state of socially valued success and thus better living conditions, young people have to work and rely on their inner assets. This is accompanied by the tendency to portray educational achievement as the key to upward social mobility. In the light of the concepts of "technologies of the self" (see Section 4.1.2) – modes with which desirable states of self are reached – young people are expected to invest in educational qualifications by displaying effort, inner strength and a striving attitude. The focus identified in the reviewed documents on developing attributes and behaviours that lead towards *educational* achievement also suggests a demand on schools to work on these attributes with their pupils.

The call on young people to adopt "higher" aims and change their dispositions and behaviours, furthermore implies the call not to pursue educational and occupational destinations which might have traditionally been pursued in their families and communities. This suggests a demand on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to dissociate themselves with their origins, both internally, by adopting different attitudes and behaviours, and socially, by acquiring different types of educational qualifications and adopting different occupational and social positions. This suggests that young people are encouraged to become different people.

Setting the findings in the wider context, and analysing them for their silences, it can be concluded that through the focus on attitudinal and cultural barriers, other origins and "solutions" for tackling social disadvantage are disregarded. These could include tackling structures of institutions, such as schools and Higher Education and knowledge conveyed, as well as economic inequalities. Promoting upward social mobility through educational and occupational achievement firstly implies that other life aims and ways of realising these goals are excluded. Secondly, occupational and social hierarchies remain unchallenged. Instead, responsibility for life outcomes is

placed on the individual, while it is seen as the task of the state to create opportunities. These opportunities, as the analysis of the debate on aspiration has shown, are mainly sought to be realised by instilling the *will* to be upwardly socially mobile.

Chapter 7: The school: Problematisation and enactment of aspiration

This chapter describes how aspiration was problematised by staff in the school studied and how ideas on aspiration were enacted and conveyed to the pupils. The analysis in the first section is based on interviews with five members of staff. Drawing on the concept of "problematisation" (see Section 4.1.1), it aimed to identify how the interviewed staff constructed "problems" and "solutions" around the issue of 'aspiration', how they described and positioned young people and what wider discourses they drew on. The second section is based on observations as well as documents that were produced by taking photographs of relevant sites in the school. It shows what ideas on aspiration were conveyed to the pupils, identifying the key themes, as well as underpinning assumptions and discourses. The third section summarises the chapter and identifies the "moral obligations" which the school's messages places on the young people with regard to their actions and their thinking about their futures.

7.1 Problematisation of aspiration by school staff

Drawing on individual interviews with five teachers, this section illustrates how 'aspiration' was talked about by school staff. Although the analysis of the teacher interviews was informed by the same analytic dimensions that were applied to policy documents (see Section 5.6.1), the presentation of the findings is structured differently. This is due to the specific nature of the teachers' talk which was less strongly organised along a problem-solution structure. Moreover, the organisation of teachers' accounts was shaped by the order and content of my interview questions (see Appendix 3), which is reflected in the presentation of the findings below.

Asking the teachers for the relevance they attributed to raising aspiration, they tended to talk about the low numbers of pupils going on to Higher Education and the reasons for this. The first part of this section, therefore, illustrates which explanatory

strategies were drawn on by teachers. The second section presents the analysis of the teachers' answers on how they thought aspiration was tackled in the school and in which way they regarded "raising aspiration" as relevant. The subsequent, third, section shows how staff defined an "aspirational" pupil. As staff related 'aspiration' mainly to certain "goals", the fourth section illustrates what types of goals were construed as desirable for the pupils. Throughout the four sections, attention is given to identifying how young people and other "subjects" were constructed and positioned in the teachers' accounts, and which wider discourses and metaphors the interviewed teachers drew on. The final section summarises the findings from the teachers' accounts and compares them with the findings from the analysis of policy documents presented in Chapter 6.

7.1.1 Aspiration as a problem of socio-economic disadvantage

In all the interviews, teachers talked about 'aspiration' as a problem in the context of transitions from school to post-destinations. They regarded the low numbers of pupils going on to Higher Education or other "positive" destinations as problematic, in particular in comparison with the higher number in more affluent areas. Asked for the reasons for this situation, the teachers drew on four different explanatory strategies. All of these saw the young people's transitions as a more or less direct consequence of their socio-economic situation of families and the local area.

The first explanatory strategy that was identified in interviewed teachers' accounts was that of seeing material poverty as having a negative impact on young people's aspirations towards post-16 destinations. Material deprivation was seen as militating against participation in Further and Higher Education in two ways. Firstly, the teachers expressed the view that the cost of Higher Education might deter young people from aspiring to participate. However, they varied in the extent to which they saw scarce financial resources as a real or an imagined obstacle. While one teacher criticised the political decision to reduce the financial support available to young people from financially disadvantaged families and referred to poverty as "a real issue" (Teacher 5), another teacher stated that the fear of debt was a myth, fuelled by the media rather than a real barrier. A third teacher mentioned costs, as well as a lack

of knowledge about financial support, as obstacles towards entering Further and Higher Education:

> *(…) if your child is eligible, able go to university or college you might be thinking, aye that's fine, but I don't have the money for it, or that's fine, but I don't have the money to get books for them or equipment or you know have decent clothing to get there, shoes, waterproof jackets, whatever, bus fares, train fares and they might not know how to go about getting grants and things like that (…). (Teacher 1)*

Secondly, three of the interviewed teachers expressed the view that family poverty impacted on aspirations towards post-compulsory education through a wish or a need of young people to earn money quickly after leaving school:

> *(…) we've got a lot of youngsters who have the ability to get into university, but they might not take that path because their financial implications, the families, the families are looking for the youngsters to gain some kind of income (…). (Teacher 5)*

> *For a lot of the pupils, money is a big aspiration here, so it'd be to get out and get a job and to be earning money as opposed to then having left school to then go on and do more studying. A lot of them are: 'let's get out of the door to get into a job', so probably to be earning money would be one of the main aspirations as to why they wouldn't go on to university, to go out and start earning. (Teacher 3)*

Both teachers converge in the assumption that the material situation of their families led to a decision to work instead of participating in Further or Higher Education, but vary as to seeing it as a wish or an obligation. Summed up, the teachers' statements suggest that material poverty was seen as a barrier that hinders young people to go on to "positive" transitions. However, while some regarded it as an existing, real barrier, others assumed that it was a perceived barrier.

The second explanatory strategy, identified in four out of five accounts, was to describe high levels of worklessness in the local area as impacting negatively on young people's attitudes towards employment and education. The teachers particularly emphasised that unemployment was prevalent across several generations and that the lack of positive examples led to the assumption of fatalist and passive

attitudes towards work, as well as a lack of motivation to aim for different routes from their parents:

> *A lot of the pupils, maybe, you know, their parents might never have worked before. They don't know what it's like to get up at 7 o'clock in the morning and work right through to 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock at night. They've never, they've never had a sort of role model. (Teacher 1)*

> *I suppose, if there are a lot of people out of work, then I suppose there's the potential for the attitude, 'Well, I'm not going to get the job, so what's the point in trying?' (Teacher 2)*

> *(…) So you've got a tradition of 30 per cent [of unemployment] of the population in this area and then it's very hard to pick yourself up and decide that you're gonna go and do all these things and go above that. Because it is above that. If you've not got a job, if you never worked, then it's hard to rise to the next level. (Teacher 4)*

These quotes suggest that the teachers made a link between the young people being unfamiliar with regular employment and the resulting apathy and expectation towards gaining employment and thus pursuing different routes from generations before them. The expressions "go above that" and "rise to the next level" used by Teacher 4 suggest that employment is seen as a way to a higher (esteemed) social position. This implicitly constructs unemployment as an illegitimate destination.

While the teachers above commented on the effects that unemployment had on young people's attitudes towards work, one teacher referred to the effects that parents' lack of knowledge about certain destinations and resources to support their children would have:

> *A lot of parents, they might be on the second or third generation, people who actually haven't worked. Or, a lot of parents, not all, but a lot of parents are in low paid occupations and, so, what I am trying to say is, that, in terms of aspiration, parents mean well for the youngsters, but they don't know how to help them aspire. (Teacher 5)*

In contrast with linking unemployment with negative attitudes, this quote suggests the assumption that unemployment entails a lack of resources to support young people to aspire highly.

A third explanatory strategy that was identified in the accounts of all but one teacher was to describe young people's aspirations as restricted through their reluctance to leave the local area. As the following quote illustrates, this was seen as problematic because it was regarded as resulting in limited knowledge about possible occupational directions:

> *I mean, for example, you often have girls (…) who either want to do hairdressing or childcare (…) largely because they don't know about anything else and they think that's really all they can go on to do (…). I try a bit, to sort of let them see that there are other things out there. Now, when, I mean sometimes they don't really sort of go there [to places outside the neighbourhood], because, I suppose, things they know about are quite safe and comfortable, so, 'I just stay with these, thank you very much'. (Teacher 2)*

The assumption is made that the young people's desire to stick to the geographically familiar also means aiming for a limited and familiar range of occupations. The reason for the young people's geographical immobility was seen as due to territorial conflicts and a lack of confidence:

> *(…) this area is quite bad for sort of gangs, so sometimes that can be an influence, if they feel they can't go outside a particular area because they don't know what is going to happen to them if they do. So, crossing that boundary. Some of them live very insular lives. (Teacher 2)*
>
> *I had pupils where, you know, I've said to them: 'I've got a place for you at such and such college further afield.' 'Oh, I don't like to go there.' 'Why not?' Because they are not comfortable, because they are out of their area, out of their comfort zone. (Teacher 1)*

The statements above link the young people's limited geographical mobility to being restricted in their capacity to imagine a variety of post-school destinations. Instead, the pupils are seen as striving for aims which are familiar to them and thus feel safe and comfortable. The latter quotes, moreover, show how the teachers regard the young people's reluctance to be geographically mobile as a consequence of their insecurities.

The view that young people's low levels of confidence and self-esteem impact on their aspirations was identified as a fourth explanatory strategy. Two teachers

assumed that the young people's lack confidence resided in the fact that they felt less equipped to go to university compared to more privileged young people:

> *And you think: all these people with better accents and better addresses are better than you, you know, so that's off my head to mitigate against [succeeding in university]. (Teacher 4)*

> *Obviously if you don't have a BMW and you don't have a five bedroom detached house and mummy and daddy don't have plenty of money, it's a much, much bigger struggle for you, isn't it? And maybe you begin to believe that you can't go to uni. (Teacher 1)*

Referring to material possessions and accents, the teachers' statements suggest that the pupils saw university as a place for people of higher social status. The first teacher, moreover, links this to the feeling among pupils of not being equally able ("are better than you").

Another teacher saw attitudinal factors as the main problem impacting on aspiration. For this teacher, it was the task of the school to give pupils more confidence in their abilities and belief in the possibility to achieve:

> *It's all kind of mental, they just think that they can't do it, but then with the right guidelines, and the right pathway, and the right instructions, then they are able to achieve more than what they actually think they can. (Teacher 3)*

In the quote, the teacher suggests that these young people are able to achieve more highly and are only held back by mental barriers. The previous two quotes suggest that the teachers see social disadvantage as impacting on the young people's will and expectation to attain highly through a lack of self-belief.

Taken together, the teachers seem to draw on explanatory strategies which make the impact of disadvantageous socio-economic situation of families and the local area relevant in different ways. Material poverty is firstly seen as directly affecting young people's aspirations to participate in Higher or Further Education, resulting in a reluctance to pay the costs or a wish or necessity to earn money soon. Secondly, disadvantage is seen as shaping negative attitudes towards education and employment; restricted knowledge of possibilities; and low confidence, which again

are the outcome of intergenerational worklessness, geographical immobility and feelings of inferiority.

This suggests that young people are described as deterred from pursuing 'high aims' through economic barriers, which are either seen as real or as imagined. While the first assumption sees young people's aspirations restricted by a lack of financial resources – which are sometimes translated into a lack of will to participate in Higher Education – the second assumption implies that young people and their families lack the knowledge that would enable them to participate. In addition to attributing low aspiration to financial barriers, some young people are described as lacking appropriate attitudes and will towards participating in post-compulsory education. More specifically, they are described as restricted and immobile – geographically and consequently in their capacity to imagine a breadth of occupational destinations – as fatalist towards their future, passive and unconfident. The reason for these attributes is located in the immobility of the young people, and in the worklessness in their families, which suggests that both the young people themselves and the environments they grow up in are made responsible.

The following section illustrates how the interviewed teachers thought problems of low transitions into positive destinations could be tackled and which benefits they associated with these efforts.

7.1.2 Overcoming hurdles in order to fulfil potential and live a better life

When speaking about the way in which aspiration was tackled in the school, the interviewed teachers both described what was done in the school and why they felt this was important. This tended to go alongside making assumptions about the pupils' characteristics and their social backgrounds, so that there is an overlap with the explanatory strategies described in Section 7.1.1.

When talking about the ways to increase the number of young people going on to post-compulsory education, the interviewed teachers mentioned mainly measures that tackled the young people's attitudes and knowledge. As a consequence of

regarding the young people as lacking in positive examples and support in their immediate environment, some teachers assumed that the school had to fill in this gap:

> *They might have father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, who have never worked before and this is new to them. It's a big, big, it's a big thing for them, because that's the environment they have been brought up in, and I don't have a better word, they don't know any better, somebody has to step in and show them a sort of, have a slant to things, hopefully a better one. (Teacher 1)*

The statement suggests that the teacher sees the need for the school to replace the family in order to improve young people's attitudes towards employment. Another teacher spoke more directly about the necessity of instilling willingness to work in the young people:

> *So it's trying to, trying to instil that sense of needing to go out to work. So, it's actually (laughs) quite basic, I suppose. But, trying to get across, 'look that is something you should want to do. And it's important, something you'll get a lot out of etc.', to try and push them on a wee bit. (Teacher 2)*

There are other teachers who spoke about the necessity of exerting gentle pressure on the young people. They presented this as a necessary measure to help young people realise the "right" aims:

> *Sometimes, they just need that final, you know, a wee push in the right direction. (Teacher 1)*
>
> *(…) to push them on and just basically to guide them down the right path. (Teacher 3)*

By referring to the "right" track and the "right direction", these statements imply the possibility that the young people could pursue "wrong" aims, due to the negative examples in their environment and their limited ability to make choices regarding their futures. The quotes indicate that the teachers see it as the school's duty to provide them with guidance about the "right" aims, and encourage them to realise these aims.

Corresponding with the assumption that the young people were limited geographically and thus in their knowledge of opportunities, several teachers

reported the need to *"take them [the pupils] out of their bubble"*, *"broaden their horizons"* and to

> *Spread the word (...) that there is other things from just this wee [name of the school] crowd and [name of the local area], there's a big wide world out there. (Teacher 1)*

The terminology used by the teacher indicates an assumption of the need for the pupils to transgress boundaries, either the geographical or in the mental sense.

Furthermore, a number of teachers stated that it is the school's task to "raise", "boost" or "build" pupils' "confidence". This went along with making young people aware that all destinations are attainable for them:

> *It's also to try to show them that although, not that it's [name of the school], but although some of the backgrounds they have, that it's there for everybody and all have the opportunity to be going on to Further Education, into college, or university, be it university, that they all should be aiming for that and despite what hurdles they've got to overcome. (Teacher 3)*

In addition to providing an explanation for the pupils' low levels of confidence and thus transitions into Further and Higher Education, this teacher presents aiming for these destinations as an imperative. Tackling attitudes such as confidence seems to be seen as one crucial element, allowing the young people to surmount other obstacles.

Attaining higher qualifications and higher status occupations were seen by all teachers as a means of allowing the young people to develop and make use of their innate abilities. Like the teacher above, several further teachers explicitly or implicitly made the assumption that young people were held back by restrictions, which, in these teachers' views, should be overcome in order to allow young people to pursue educational and occupational routes that corresponded to either their preferences or abilities:

> *(...) not let barriers (...) prevent them from doing what they want to do. (Teacher 3)*
>
> *(...) achieve as much as they can achieve. (Teacher 4)*

While the first statement highlights the importance that teachers give to the young people pursuing aims that they *want* to pursue, the second statement states they should aim to achieve what they *can* achieve. This suggests that both the fulfilment of individual preferences and the fulfilment of individual abilities are seen as desirable. Both statements also indicate that the realisation of young people's aims is seen as restricted.

The assumption that the pupils were held back by barriers from realising their potential and preferences implied that the young people were seen as having innate abilities, although this was not expressed explicitly by all teachers. One teacher did so by expressing the view that intelligence was spread equally in the population:

> *Unless you've got learning difficulties, I believe that everybody is capable of achieving at whatever level. And I know there's exceptional people who can be very brilliant at art or very brilliant at music, but the average person, it's a norm, intelligence, is a norm and most people in our school are in that norm, so they have the potential to achieve just as much as everybody else (...).* *(Teacher 4)*

In the statement, the teacher seems to implicitly defy the idea that the young people are less intelligent due to their social background. Instead, they are portrayed as having the same talents as the rest of the population, and can thus reach each level of achievement. The same idea seems to underpin the following statement:

> *There's a lot of pupils out in our school that are fantastic kids and they have great qualities but they just, they just don't show it at times because they just, it's not maybe pushed out in them enough and brought out in them enough (...). We could probably spend more time to make them realise the qualities they do have. (Teacher 3)*

The statement suggests there is an assumption that the young people possess innate abilities, but that there are impediments that hinder them to develop fully. It is consequently seen as a task of the school to enable young people to realise these inner qualities. The above statements seem to suggest that helping young people aspire and reach destinations that are traditionally the preserve of more privileged people is seen as an issue of fairness.

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the teachers regarded it as important to provide young people with the opportunity to fully develop their individual ability (and preferences). When asked about the wider relevance of raising aspiration, the teachers highlighted gains for the young people. Most staff expressed the assumption that a transition to "positive destinations" leads to better occupational positions and thus to a better life. Two teachers saw a better quality of life as a desirable aim:

> *The message the youngsters get is that the quality of their <u>life</u> can be much better, they can create more opportunities by working hard and gaining qualifications. (Teacher 4)*

> *If you earn a degree then your earning capacities increase greatly, your ability to enjoy life and achieve a certain level of stability, you know, it is possible because they apply to become a dentist or whatever, you know. (Teacher 5)*

It is striking that the latter interviewee associated the way to ascertain "quality of life" with a professional occupation (dentist) and earning a degree. This suggests that valuable aims are associated with Higher Education and professional aims (see Section 7.4.1). In both statements above, the teachers presented educational qualifications as a means to achieve a *better* life. This suggests that the teachers regard it as desirable for the young people to change their present life circumstances. The idea that educational qualifications allow the young people to overcome disadvantage and thus transform their lives can be illustrated by the following statements:

> *(...) that's a road out for these people. And it's a road to something that might just make a difference in their lives. (Teacher 1)*

> *I think a lot of youngsters have, they're much more aware of how they can break out of poverty by using education as a means to that end. (Teacher 5)*

> *A lot of youngsters, who do apply to university here, have a clear grasp of the fact that it's a life-changing experience, in every way, geographically, you know, they move away from the area you know they've lived in. It just opens up so many opportunities for them. (Teacher 5)*

The terminology the teachers drew on suggests escape ("road out", "break out", "move away") from a situation of entrapment. In the latter statement, the teacher related Higher Education as a means to break away from the geographical environment and to escape restricted opportunities. This statement suggests that

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"escape" is seen as both a condition of and the reward for social mobility. This resonates with the teachers' assumption that young people's reluctance to leave the local area leads to limited educational and occupational opportunities (see Section 7.1.1).

By describing the realisation of individual potential and a better quality of life as the main purposes of having aspiration, the teachers emphasised personal benefits for the young people. When probed for potential societal benefits of "raising aspiration", only one of the interviewed teachers elaborated on this point:

> *I think the people going to university do see themselves as giving something back to their community and to the area and to the city as a whole. But they get huge satisfaction out of that, I suppose that's what I mean. (Teacher 4)*

At the end of the statement, the teacher emphasised again the personal "satisfaction" young people gained from participating in Higher Education. While the interviewed teachers seem to see higher aspiration as relevant at an individual level, their comments on providing young people with the chance to escape poverty also suggest that this is underpinned by ideas of social justice.

This section has shown that the teachers saw the relevance of raising aspiration in allowing young people to overcome obstacles which prevent them from realising their innate potential, achieve educationally and thus overcome poverty and realise a better life. While it was not made explicit by the teachers what they thought these barriers were, they saw it as the role of the school to address attitudinal dispositions among young people, which included an effort to widen their "horizons", improve their confidence, guide them to make "right" choices and instil a will to work. The young people are thus constructed as innately able but restricted through their backgrounds, which leads to a need for the school to compensate for this by addressing the attitudinal attributes in young people. The tendency among teachers to emphasis the relevance of enabling young people to realise their innate potential, achieve educationally and overcome disadvantage, suggests that this is underpinned by an idea of social justice through upward social mobility.

7.1.3 Aspiration as goal and orientation towards the future

Both the noun 'aspiration(s)' and the adjective 'aspirational' were known and used by the school staff. Since in the individual interviews, staff were asked to discuss their understanding of an "aspirational pupil", most of the statements refer to the adjective. The teachers associated two features with an "aspirational pupil": having an aim for the future and acting towards realising this aim.

All teachers described an "aspirational pupil" as someone who has an aim they wanted to reach in the future. This was expressed by statements such as:

> *You have a goal. (Teacher 4)*
>
> *Someone who knows where they want to go in life. (Teacher 1)*
>
> *Someone who wanted to go on to something on leaving school. (Teacher 2)*

All statements suggest that teachers see an "aspirational pupil" as somebody who is certain and decided about an aim in the future. Moreover, they associate an aspirational person with somebody who envisages a specific aim. While the first teacher expressed this explicitly through mentioning "you have a goal", the other statements do this more implicitly by referring to "go on to something" or "where they want to go". The statements also show that the teachers understand the future aims as either more immediate ("on leaving school") or more long-term ("in life").

The importance of having a concrete goal was highlighted by one teacher, stating the assumption that it leads to more effort and thus attainment in school:

> *I think studies have shown that if people have something to work towards, then they're likely to do better in school. So it's trying to get them started to think about it as early as possible, so they've maybe worked out what their goal is so that they can then sort of be working towards that. (Teacher 4)*

Besides stating the necessity of identifying individual aims early on, this teacher also assumed that these aims should be concrete:

> *A vague aspiration maybe isn't good enough; I think to have a goal, a specific goal, means that the hard work that goes with that aspiration is easier to attain. (Teacher 4)*

Both statements illustrate the assumption that it is positive for the young people to have an aim, as it entails the motivation to realise this aim. The teacher presents aspiration as the first element in a causal chain, sparking academic effort and consequently leading to educational attainment.

Some teachers' statements, furthermore, suggest that a person who is "aspirational" chooses and pursues his or her aim in a methodical way. One teacher defined that aims should be chosen based on knowledge about different alternatives:

> *(...) it's just as long as you know what's out there and you've looked at the options and you've made an informed choice. (Teacher 4)*

Another teacher saw a person that considered different options as "aspirational":

> *Someone who was actively trying to find out about different options (...). Maybe to have an idea and then want to find out about that (...). (Teacher 2)*

One of the teachers expressed a similar view, when stating the necessity for young people to take some time to consider different options:

> *(...) make sure they kind of think about what they're doing and not just apply for the first thing that popped into their head. They thought a bit about why they're wanting to do what they want to do, so, in that sense they go out to the right thing. (Teacher 2)*

Both statements above suggest that young people might not make proper choices, because they do not consider different options when making decisions. The idea of insufficient choice is related to the lack of effort and limited knowledge about existing options. The statements suggest that these teachers further qualify the requirement of having aims. Pupils are not seen as "aspirational" if they have *an* aim, unless they arrive at their aim through a deliberate informed choice *between* alternatives.

Besides linking aspiration to the possession of aims for the future, several teachers defined an "aspirational pupil" as someone whose actions were *oriented towards* an aim. This included seeking knowledge or information about occupational and educational destinations. Next to seeking knowledge about an aim, several teachers

linked being "aspirational" to the disposition/readiness of realising chosen aims. This can be illustrated through expressions like:

> *Someone, who maybe knows what they want to do and trying to work towards that. (Teacher 2)*
>
> *You have a goal and you get there. (Teacher 4)*
>
> *Push forward to get the end result. (…) strive to get somewhere. (Teacher 3)*

The statements suggest that the teachers saw an "aspirational pupil" as somebody whose actions are oriented towards realising a future aim. Furthermore, expressions like "push forward" and "work towards" indicate that somebody who is "aspirational" makes a (sustained) effort to reach their aim. One teacher identified other personal characteristics as necessary for pupils to be able to pursue their aims:

> *If a pupil is confident and knows their good points and knows their qualities, they'll be more likely to strive to get somewhere, whereas somebody who lacks in self-esteem and has a lower confidence will always say: 'Oh, no I can't do that, I'm not able to do that.' (Teacher 3)*

It becomes apparent that this teacher saw character traits such as confidence as prerequisites for an aspirational attitude and behaviour.

While the teachers cited above linked being "aspirational" to the disposition of realising one's aims generally, one teacher elaborated on this point. Presenting the trajectory of a former pupil, she stated that in her view an "aspirational pupil" realises his or her goals, despite obstacles such as low expectations from others:

> *She [the former pupil] knew exactly what she wanted to do and yet along the way there might have been one or two people who thought 'you'll never get there', but she did. So that, to me, is someone who is aspirational. (Teacher 1)*

The teacher furthermore pointed out that aims do not necessarily have to be reached through a direct pathway:

> *That girl took another route to actually get to where she wanted. She could have stayed on at school, but for some reason, I don't know what, she decided she would go to college and then obviously from college she was going on to university. (Teacher 1)*

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This teacher thus defined the action of reaching an aim as decisive, not the route to get there. She, moreover, seems to highlight the pupils' quality of *persisting* in reaching her aims despite obstacles.

The previous section has shown that the teachers linked being "aspirational" to having an aim for the future and to being behaviourally and attitudinally oriented towards this aim. The latter included making a sustained effort to realise and having the confidence to adopt and pursue an aim. Some of the teachers' statements suggested, however, that a further criterion for being "aspirational" was to arrive at an aim through an informed consideration of several options. The findings presented suggest the teachers emphasise the need for the pupils to be future oriented by adopting concrete aims and displaying striving attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, the importance of making informed choices is evident in the teachers' accounts. Having indicated that not all aims were linked to aspiration by the teachers, the following section clarifies which types of future aims the teachers regarded as "aspirational".

7.1.4 Aspiration equals Higher Education and 'good goals'

Although one teacher said that it was the aim of the school that more pupils should "make a successful transition into, you know, a good career" (Teacher 5), in most individual interviews, teachers made 'aspiration' relevant in the context of pupils' transitions from school to post-16 destinations. This was not always done explicitly, but became evident in answers on questions, such as how aspiration should be raised, why they considered raising aspiration as important, or how successful they thought the school's efforts to raise aspiration had been. The teachers varied as to what kind of destinations they spoke about. Three teachers related 'aspiration' to participation in Higher or Further education. One of them saw a high number of school leavers going on to these destinations as an indicator of successfully raising aspirations:

> *Konstanze: How successful would you think is the school is in its attempt to raise aspirations?*
>
> *Teacher 3: Well, certainly, I don't know the exact numbers (...) but I do know there is a high number of our 6th years that go on to university and into Further Education.*

Similarly, two other teachers see the school's effort to tackle aspirations in encouraging young people to go on to Further and Higher Education:

> *So in terms of aspiration we have built up a good relationship over the years with the [name of FE organisation], trying to encourage more youngsters to go to Higher or Further Education. (Teacher 5)*

> *In 2009, [number of pupils] went to university/Higher Education, that included places like [name of Further Education College] and you know to do an HND [Higher National Diploma], so the figures speak for themselves. And as well as that, a number of young people went to be apprentices at the [name of organisation] there's a lot of good jobs out there, where young people will be trained by their employer, so, I feel that was aspirational. (Teacher 4)*

Through linking Further and Higher Education with 'aspiration', the teachers construct them as destinations that are positive and desirable for the young people. It can be noted, however, that university generally, or concrete Higher Education Institutions more specifically, are mentioned first in the above statements, which could imply that this destination is given a higher value than Further Education or training. At the same time, it can be noted that the teacher above attempts to highlight destinations other than Higher Education in her definition of what counts as "aspirational". A number of further statements show the attempt to broaden the definition of 'aspiration'. For example, one teacher stated that Higher Education is not the only criterion for measuring aspiration:

> *Not that university is the only way of assessing how aspirational the school is. (Teacher 5)*

Two further teachers rejected the idea that university should be an aim for every pupil:

> *Not everybody has to go to university. (Teacher 4)*

> *So for some pupils it's not going on to university, for some pupils it's going out going on to Further Education, getting a place in college or for some of them it's just to go out and get a job. (Teacher 3)*

The previous two statements suggest that what is seen as a worthwhile destination, and thus what is seen as aspirational, depends on the individual young person. The latter statement seems to imply that Higher Education might not be a suitable aim for

every individual pupil and that the young people's aims should be based on their individual capabilities and preferences.

The teachers' tendency to present Higher Education as desirable, while also suggesting that these might not be suitable for every young person, seemed to be reconciled with the idea that all young people should pursue an aim which enabled them to realise their potential:

> *An aspirational person is somebody who does what they choose to do and fulfils their potential whatever that happens to be. (Teacher 4)*
>
> *(...) they should be aspiring to, to do the best that they can and push themselves for what they want to and not let barriers, I suppose you could say prevent them from doing what they want to do. (Teacher 3)*

These statements imply the assumption that somebody who is "aspirational" has an aim that was formed on the basis of a personal choice and at the same time allows the person to develop their capacities to the maximum. The two criteria that the teachers associate with being "aspirational" can be seen as linked through the idea that an "aspirational pupil" has an aim that is individually suitable to them.

The assumption that there are valuable aims other than Higher Education is reflected in several teachers' statements. One teacher, for example, stated that an aspirational pupil was somebody who had a "good goal", which was characterised as followed:

> *(...) a good goal, which is a goal that will give you choices in life, which will give you a quality of life, which would be a worthwhile thing to do. (Teacher 4)*

The statement indicates on the one hand that a "good goal" is not bound to a specific aim (content), but is a goal that provides "choices" and "quality of life". This suggests that the teacher links a "good goal" to an occupational or educational destination that allows for a certain standard of living.

Another teacher stated more explicitly what counted as a good future aim. This interviewee saw it as the task of the school to ensure that pupils went on to a "sort of positive destination, i.e. college, university, work or whatever." By using the

expression "positive destination", the teacher draws on a term used commonly in policy debates on preventing young people from being NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) (see also Chapter 6). The statement suggests that destinations which include Further Education or employment are to be seen as desirable for the young people.

The fact that the teachers stress that university is not the *only* valid aim suggests on the one hand that Higher Education participation is the standard against which others are measured and is thus implicitly rendered more valuable. On the other hand, it was shown that the teachers presented other destinations as also valuable – if they are suited to an individual's abilities and preferences. This suggests a tension between efforts to raise aspirations with the aim to increase the numbers of young people going on to Higher Education (and to some degree Further Education) and the acknowledgement that other destinations might be more suited to (some) pupils. The minimum criterion teachers seem to suggest for an aim to be valuable seems to that it includes some form of Further Education, training or employment and allows the realisation of the young person's ability.

7.1.5 Summary and link to findings from the policy analysis

Comparing the findings on the way teachers problematised aspiration with those of the policy analysis, similarities prevail. Both in the policy debate and in the teachers' accounts, 'aspiration' was as an element of the wider "problem" of comparatively low levels of transitions into Higher Education and "positive destinations" among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both assume that these young people are held back from realising innate "potential", resulting in low educational and occupational outcomes and thus the impossibility to overcome disadvantage. While the policy debate explicitly identified social justice as a "higher moral", the teachers seemed to suggest this more implicitly and highlighted the better quality of life young people could ascertain. Both the assumptions by policy and the teachers seemed to be underpinned by a meritocratic form of social justice that could be realised through equal opportunities to upward social mobility. In contrast with the

policy debate, economic prosperity was not mentioned as a "higher moral" of raising aspirations by the interviewed teachers.

In both the policy debate and the teachers' accounts, the pupils' socio-economic background was seen as impacting detrimentally on their aspirations to pursue Higher Education and highly-qualified occupations. Both regarded disadvantage to be mediated by attitudes, resulting from economic and cultural characteristics of disadvantaged communities. The major explanatory strategy teachers drew on, was to assume that the tradition of worklessness in the local area, led to negative attitudes towards education and work and an absence of adequate role models. This resonates with the policy debate, which was found to locate a lack of aspiration in high levels of unemployment, among other economic features of disadvantaged communities.

A further parallel between policy and teachers' accounts was to describe young people as restricted due to geographical immobility, resulting in limited ability to envisage a range of educational and occupational pathways – in particular those which were not typical in their immediate environment – as well as passive and fatalist attitudes. Both drew on images of barriers that young people needed to overcome. Despite this parallel with the policy documents, the teachers' explanations seemed to give more attention to the direct and indirect impact of material poverty on the young people's aspirations, highlighting that young people are deterred by the cost of Further and Higher Education, or have a wish or need to enter the labour market to earn money. Similar to policy, the "problem" of aspiration was also linked to a negative self-concept (expressed by referring to "confidence") resulting from their socio-economically disadvantaged position.

Comparing the "solutions" suggested in the policy with the strategies of tackling aspiration reported by the teachers, both seem to espouse a strategy of tackling attitudes, knowledge and behaviours, besides and in order to improve attainment. While in the policy debate, external and internal barriers are sought be removed, the teachers seem to focus on addressing problems that can be located in the individual pupils, which also speaks about the limited influence the school has on changing

wider circumstances. Detailing the ways in which young people's aspirations are sought to be raised, the analysis of the policy documents and the teachers' accounts identified similar strategies. These included improving young people attitudes toward educational attainment and work, instilling a will to work and adopt "high" aims, and providing young people with knowledge about different opportunities (that is widen their "horizons" and raising their "confidence").

The way teachers in this study defined an "aspirational pupil" was underpinned by the idea of a person being directed towards the future by having a goal, orienting their behaviour towards the future and developing qualities that underpin this behaviour, such as confidence and self-belief. This reflects the way policy treats 'aspiration' both as a synonym for an aim and an orientation towards the future. By defining an "aspirational pupil" as someone who pursues personally and deliberately chosen goals, the staff constructed the ideal pupil as someone with an individualistic and self-reliant personality, similar to the notion of aspiration in policy texts and academic literature. As in the policy documents, some of the interviewed teachers associated being "aspirational" with making individually suitable choices and with the aim of realising potential. In contrast with policy documents, the teachers seemed to emphasise the necessity of having a concrete goal, as well as consciously choosing and methodically pursuing aims.

The analysis of the policy debate and the teachers' accounts shows that having (high) aspirations tends to be linked to highly-qualified occupations, Higher Education, and, to some extent, Further Education. Implicitly, these are presented as the most valuable. In the teachers' accounts, however, there seems to be a stronger attempt to emphasise other educational and occupational destinations as valuable as well, given that they are suited to the young person's abilities and/or preferences. This suggests a tension between the efforts of preparing more young people for Higher and Further Education (and the idea in wider discourses that these are the most valuable destinations) and the idea of individually suitable and chosen destinations. The idea that a good aim should tap the pupils' individual capacities/potential can be seen as a strategy of reconciling this tension. Although the teachers' accounts seem to be

underpinned by a more individual-centred notion of aspiration, they converge with policy in constructing qualified employment and post-compulsory education as legitimate destinations.

7.2 Conveying ideas on aspiration to the pupils

This section illustrates how ideas on aspiration were enacted and conveyed to the pupils in everyday school practices. It was found that the school conveyed ideas on aspiration in two major ways: by promoting certain occupational and educational aims as desirable to the pupils and by instilling attitudes and behaviours allowing the young people to pursue these aims. As a result, the findings are presented in two sections (see Sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2). This is followed by a section which relates these findings to those from the teachers' accounts, illustrating how abstract ideas on aspiration were enacted in the school by conveying them to the pupils. The findings presented in the following stem from observations and from the photographed sites in the school[11]. While the analysis concentrates on the discursive patterns expressed through language, other features such as material and spatial aspects were taken into account (see Section 5.6.2).

7.2.1 Higher Education and professional destinations as equating success

In the school, the pupils were often presented with the idea that they should aim for "success". The term 'success' was used to refer to more immediate aims such as attainment in school, participation in post-16 education, particularly Higher Education, and certain later life aims with regard to lifestyle and occupations.

In a number of observed situations, teachers associated high attainment with success. When speaking about exam results, for example, the teachers frequently reminded the pupils that the main aim of the school was the pupils' success:

> *Teacher: You know I want you to be…*

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[11] Most names of events observed and sites referred to in this section were altered in order to protect the anonymity of the school.

Several pupils: Successful.

Teacher: I hope you know that I want the best for you.

(Study Skills Day, Fieldnotes, 19/05/10)

The verbal exchange suggests that the pupils knew what answer the teacher expected to hear, that is were familiar with the terminology. It also shows that in the school being "successful", that is attaining highly, was expressed as an expectation of the young people. Generally, attainment in school was observed to be presented as positive, desirable and attractive to the pupils, for example by directly addressing the pupils through statements such as "You should be proud of being clever." (Fieldnotes, 19/05/10)

Success in the form of high educational attainment was rendered attractive by presenting it as special and deserving recognition and esteem. An example of this was the annual Awards Ceremony at the end of the school year (see box below). The

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Junior and Senior Awards Ceremonies

The ceremonies were held during the afternoon at the end of the school year. Pupils who were given notice that they received an award and their families were invited to attend. The event took place in the assembly hall which was equipped with rows of chairs for the pupils and families and a podium with flower bouquets. The ceremony began with a welcome by the head teacher (HT) who introduced the "Platform Party" – the school's senior management team and a representative from the local community – who walked through the hall onto the podium, accompanied by marching music played by school band. The HT welcomed the attendants, among them former pupils who study at university and colleges. In the introduction, the HT declared that they were celebrating "achievement and attainment", however, not only academic achievement but all sorts of "success". The HT talked about the successes in the previous year, highlighting former pupils who went on to study dentistry, medicine and art and a pupil who won a prize in a cooking competition (an "example for someone who knows what he wants to do and works with school to get there"). After listing the extra activities that took place over the last year, the HT called certain pupils onto the stage to receive their awards. Awards were given for "effort", "academic excellence", "attendance" as well as 1st, 2nd and 3rd place in different subjects and a special prize for community engagement. At the end, one pupil from each year group received a "Dux" award [award given to the highest performing pupil of the year in Scottish secondary schools] and one pupil the "Dux of School". At the end of the Senior Awards ceremony, two S6 pupils who were leaving the school after the summer held a speech in which they thanked their teachers. They highlighted the "opportunities" that teachers offered to pupils, and remarked: "Now it's up to us to grab them and succeed in life". The pupils furthermore mentioned the university courses they were planning to start in the autumn.

(Fieldnotes, 22/06/10)

set up in space and time, as well as the symbols and language used during the ceremony, conveyed the idea that academic attainment and effort were special achievements that were rewarded and respected.

The idea that attainment was rewarded also seemed to underpin other extra-curricular events, such as the Study Skills Day, which was held for different year groups. Some of these days took place in an old building that resembled a conference centre. When I asked a teacher for the reason for choosing the location, she said it was in order "to give it a little bit more status". The choice of the location was thus intended to link educational attainment to social status and esteem. The idea that attainment was rewarded was reinforced though selecting pupils who had achieved grades above a certain level to take part in these events. Both the Awards Ceremony and the Study Skills Day thus conveyed not only the general message that attainment deserved recognition but ascribed distinction to the high attaining pupils in the school.

At certain points, this idea was spelled out explicitly to the high attaining young people by describing them with terms suggesting superiority:

> *Konstanze: I've been to [name of university] with S6 pupils; Teacher: Ah, the crème de la crème, the ones who know what they want. (Fieldnotes, 02/03/10)*

> *Teacher: These are my stars, tell Konstanze what you want to become.*
> *First pupil: A PE-teacher [Physical Education teacher].*
> *Second pupil: A physiotherapist. (Fieldnotes, 30/03/10)*

The use of the terms "crème de la crème" and "stars" indicates that pupils were seen as special and that they were in a higher position compared to other pupils in the school. The quotes show that this is the case because they were linked to aspiring to occupations which required a Higher Education degree.

Attainment at school appeared to be the most immediate aim the school encouraged the young people to aspire to. However, post-school destinations, particularly within Higher and Further Education, were frequently talked about and linked to success. The analysis of interactions between pupils and teachers and sites such as wall

displays in the school indicates that Higher Education was presented as the most desirable post-school destination. In comparison to other destinations, it was both promoted more visibly – e.g. through wall displays – and was linked to success, esteem and fame through the terminology and visual symbols used.

The high esteem attached to people who attained Higher Education degrees could be identified in teachers' statements when they introduced me to the pupils at the beginning of an activity that I observed. They usually emphasised the fact that I not only went to university, but was pursuing a doctoral degree:

> *Konstanze is a student at [university name], she already has a degree. She put all the work into this and now is now doing a PhD, which is a three year research programme. (Teacher in Study Skills class, Fieldnotes, 20/04/10)*

> *She is doing a PhD; this means she is going to be called Doctor. (Teacher on Study Skills Day, Fieldnotes, 18/02/10)*

Both statements present pursuing a PhD as an achievement that deserves respect. In the first statement, this is done by emphasising the individual effort required, in the second statement, by mentioning the title that comes with it. The title of "doctor" seems to be shorthand for expressing recognition for a person and their achievement.

A further example for likening university as well as professional occupations to success was the repeatedly told story about a former pupil who had gone on to study law at a pre-1992 university in the city. In the following version the former pupil's path was equated with the success of a prominent tennis player:

> *The key to success is hard work. People like Andrew Murray didn't become great tennis players overnight but trained hard, 10 hours a day. One former pupil, currently in second year law at [university name] decided some time along the way that he wanted to do law. (Teacher on Study Skills Day, Fieldnotes 18/02/10)*

By naming the former pupil and a famous tennis player in the same sentence, attending university and studying a subject that leads to a professional destination is equated with a high achievement that receives public esteem. By underlining the amount of necessary effort, the achievement seems to be presented as worthy of

recognition (For the promotion of effort as a precondition to success, see Section 7.2.2). The statement was repeated by teachers in similar versions at other occasions, referring to further former pupils who went on to a pre-1992 university to study dentistry or medicine. This suggests an implicit hierarchy of occupational destinations and Higher Education institutions.

Another example of promoting Higher Education participation and certain occupations were the two Boards of Achievements. Both were located next to the school's office, opposite of the main entrance. One of the boards showed pupils from the previous year group with a short description of their educational destinations. The title of the board as well as the way former pupils were presented on the board surrounded by stars. All of the individuals pictured attended Higher Education courses (including Higher Education courses at Further Education Colleges). The second board included alumni across several decades. It had the subtitle "what we have achieved" and included photographs of the individuals as well as short descriptions of their occupational and educational successes. The board pictured individuals who held Higher Education degrees, were professionals or were publically known figures. Among the latter were two football players, an actress and a community activist who was portrayed in a newspaper article. This indicates that, besides Higher Education, publically visible achievements linked to an individual talent or societal engagement were also regarded as honourable.

Another example for the association of conspicuous achievements with success could be observed in the Study Skill class, which was attended by pupils in S1 and S2. In a unit on "successful people", publicly known figures such as the Microsoft founder Bill Gates and acclaimed brain surgeon Ben Carson were presented to the pupils (for an analysis of how the story of Ben Carson was used to illustrate individual precondition for success, see Section 7.2.2). The prominent figures were not only presented for their occupational achievements but also linked to certain attributes, being described as "rich, talented, brave, funny, a role model" (Fieldnotes, 09/03/10). This suggests that 'success' was not only directly linked to publically recognised achievements, reached though applying individual talent in the context of a career,

but linked to rewards such as fame and wealth and positive character traits, such as benevolence. Thus, "success" was presented as an expression of extraordinary career achievements and made attractive through presenting "successful" people as uniting an array of positive attributes.

A further example regards a task in the Study Skills class, in which the pupils were asked to give a presentation on an "inspirational" person. Here, the teacher stressed that the criterion should not be the person's fame but their contribution to society:

> *Think about an inspirational person. You will have to give a talk about the person. The person should not be from Girls Aloud, but be a person who has made a difference. (Teacher in Study Skills class, 30/03/10)*

The teacher furthermore pointed out that a person who "made a difference" is someone who made a scientific discovery or worked for charity or set up a business, hence some form of public achievement that was of benefit to a wider group of people. The observation that the teacher only reluctantly allowed pupils to present acquainted people as "inspirational" suggests an emphasis on publicly recognised and visible achievements.

The data presented above illustrated that Higher Education, professional occupations and publically renowned career achievements based on individual talent were promoted as desirable aims by associating them with success and rewards such as esteem. However, there were also indicators that suggested that other destinations were presented as desirable to the young people.

For example, half way through the fieldwork, a poster advertising apprenticeships was hung on one of the walls in the assembly hall. The poster evoked an image of ascent and progress and thus suggested that apprenticeships were a path to a higher position. Apprenticeships and other post-16 destinations were also promoted as positive aims in the context of individual career advice, in the PSE class, at a Careers Fair and at assemblies. This resonates with the teachers' assumption that there are other "good goals" and the efforts of securing "positive destinations" for the young people (see Section 7.1).This suggests that routes other than Higher Education were

also presented as valuable, but in a less visible way. While Higher Education was presented as the most desirable destination *generally*, other aims were seen as worthwhile for *individual* young people.

The tendency to present Higher Education as the most desirable destination over other "positive destinations", mirrors both the tendencies in policy discourse and in the teachers' reasoning around aspirations. The school seemed to promote these aims by presenting them as expressions of "success" and by associating and rewarding them with recognition. In addition, the pupils were given ideas on the characteristics of "successful" people. "Successful" people were presented as attaining highly in education and pursuing a career which enabled them to realise their individual talent. Furthermore, "successful people" were presented as possessing a number of characteristics, which were both the outcome and prerequisite for success, including extrinsic rewards such as income and positive character traits. Achievements on the basis of personal talent, effort and hard work were particularly highlighted. The following section will describe in more detail how the school presented the pupils with ideas on how they would achieve success.

7.2.2 Success as dependent on the individual

Alongside the promotion of Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations as desirable, pupils were also given the message that their future was the outcome of their decisions and success, which was dependent on individual assets such as talent, effort and motivation.

Presenting success and an individual's destination in life more generally as a "choice", the pupils were encouraged to envisage aims that they might not have regarded as achievable for themselves. The call on young people not to limit their aims is reflected by a poster placed in a prominent position in the school. The poster invites the young people to leave the "safe" home, "dream" and "explore" the world. This suggests an invitation to the young people to aim for destinations which might be perceived as distant or unachievable. It moreover promotes attitudes such as courage and mobility, which can be understood both in the geographical sense and in

the sense of exploring new places of imagination and new destinations. The demand to go beyond the familiar mirrors the problematisation of the young people's narrow horizons, identified in the policy debate and in the teachers' accounts (see Sections 6.3 and 7.1).

The idea that success was possible was conveyed by providing the pupils with examples of "successful" people, either more immediate ones such as former pupils in the school or more distant ones, in the form of famous personalities. The most explicit example of this was the presentation of the story of the US-American brain surgeon Ben Carson in the Study Skills class (see box below). This included watching a long feature film on his life story, followed by an invitation to reflect on several aspects regarding the attitudes and behaviours that lead to his success.

The central idea underpinning the Ben Carson's story appeared to be that everybody can achieve any aim, regardless of their familial background or the conditions of their upbringing. Instead, it is suggested that success is the outcome of a personal decision (the central element in the story being the turning point at which Carson abandons violence and starts to study) and a combination of talent (also suggested by the film title Gifted Hands) as well as attitudes and behaviours, such as self-belief, effort, and perseverance.

The Ben Carson story
Ben Carson came from a broken home in Detroit, Michigan. He never thought that he was any good at school and was often referred to as the class dummy by his peers. It was his mother that stressed that the only way to escape poverty was by getting an education. Ben suffered from a really bad temper and at the age of 14 he tried to stab another boy with a camping knife. He realised after that he had three choices; jail, residential school or the grave. He didn't like any of those choices and decided that he was going to try harder at school. He did try harder and started getting good grades. This then led to a scholarship at Harvard University. By the age of 33 Ben became the youngest chief of brain surgery ever at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Ben specialised in paediatric brain surgery and successfully operated on conjoined twins in 1997. To date he performs approximately 500 operations a year and has started his own scholarship fund to help disadvantaged children. (Cited from a handout in Study Skills Class)

The idea that innate talent and ability are independent from background was mentioned more implicitly than explicitly in the school. The idea was communicated through some of the slogans on posters. One poster, for example, stated that people would be surprised if they realised what they were capable of. Further posters suggested that talents had to be discovered and developed through other attitudes.

Several instances exemplify how the school conveyed the idea that the young people's future life depended on their individual decisions. Several posters in the school corridors and the PSE base referred to the importance of choice and decisions. One poster, for example, read: "You are who you choose to be", and another one stated: "The choices we don't make are as important as the ones we do make".

In addition to the possibility of influencing their own lives, a number of posters in the school corridors reminded the pupils of the possibility of changing societal circumstances. One, for example, stated: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Taken together, these posters seemed to convey the message that an individual has the possibility to shape their own future, as well as the world around them. They seemed to suggest to the pupils that their actions have consequences and call on them to make (the right) choices.

The idea that success is a consequence of a deliberate decision was also conveyed by drawing on the example of the former pupil who went on to study law:

> *One former pupil, currently in second year law at [university name], decided some time along the way that he wanted to do law. He had been a riot in S2. He is not brighter than anyone else here. It's about choice. Time to get smart. (Fieldnotes, 18/02/10)*

By suggesting that going to university is a matter of "choice" rather than intelligence ("not brighter than anyone else"), the teacher seems reject the idea that success is only possible for other, extraordinary people. At another point, the teacher presented a variation of the story, in which she pointed out that there was "nothing magical about it [getting to university]" (Fieldnotes, 05/03/10). Similar to the message

conveyed in the Ben Carson story, she seemed to suggest that success was not due to external uncontrollable circumstances ("magic") but instead it was in the hands of the individual.

The idea that success was an outcome of an individual's decision was often accompanied by highlighting the importance of attitudes and behaviours necessary in order to realise success. This included the demand to have a concrete (educational and/or occupational) aim and strive towards realising it through displaying self-belief, persistence and effort.

Persistent effort was emphasised as a prerequisite to success at several points by the teachers. The following statement illustrates how a teacher reminded the pupils that reaching successful destinations, such as university, requires hard work:

> *Teacher: How do you become successful?*
> *Pupil: You revise.*
> *Teacher: Yes, through hard work. (Fieldnotes, 05/03/10)*

The idea of showing persistence rather than "giving up" was repeatedly mentioned by teachers and was a theme of some of the posters in the school corridors. One of the slogans suggested that many people failed because they gave up when getting close to their aims and another one asserted that "strong people" did learn from their mistakes. A similar idea seemed to be promoted by referring to the importance of "resilience", a term that the teachers regularly asked the pupils to name. "Resilience" was usually used to describe persistent behaviour in the face of difficulties. It was related to situations either in school or in later life:

> *Teacher: What does 'resilient' mean?*
>
> *Pupil: Not to give up.*
>
> *Teacher: Yes, It will be important for you to be resilient next year because it will be tough. If you don't understand anything at the beginning, think that you will learn it. (Study Skills day, Fieldnotes, 19/05/10)*

> *Teacher asks pupils on episode in Ben Carson film: What happened in the previous 24 hours of his life?*

Pupil: He saved the life of a girl.

Teacher: What else happened? His twins died and he went back to work. How can you describe him with the 5 Rs?

Pupil: Responsible.

Teacher: Right. But more than that,

Pupil: Resilient.

Teacher: Very good. (Fieldnotes, 20/04/10)

Both quotes imply the message that one needs to continue to pursue one's aims and efforts – even if confronted with obstacles. The first statement seems to invite the pupils to believe in their abilities and in the efficacy of their effort.

The evidence presented above suggests that the school tried to convey to the young people that they could reach any aim, no matter how distant it seemed. This was accompanied by suggesting that success was dependent mainly on the individual's talents, coupled with the "right" attitudes and behaviours, such as self-belief, perseverance and effort. It could also be shown that the school presented life outcomes as lying in the hand of the individual, rather than being determined by external circumstances such as social background and fate. The general message given to the pupils was that they could choose to become successful and realise this by drawing on their internal assets and by changing their behaviours and attitudes.

7.2.3 Section summary: Conveying ideas on aspiration

The previous section illustrated how the school promoted educational attainment, Higher Education and professional destinations as goals by linking them to success. These were rendered desirable to the pupils by creating associations with fame, social esteem and reward. Other aims, especially if they involved Further Education or training, were also presented as legitimate, but this was done less visibly and on a personal basis rather than at a general level. This mirrors both assumptions in the policy discourse and among teachers that Higher Education and professional destinations are the most acclaimed destinations and that a higher number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds should adopt them as personal aims. In the school, as well as in policy, educational attainment and qualifications were presented

as success in themselves but also as ways to realise rewarded occupational positions and thus achieve a better life.

The school rendered educational and occupational success attractive to the pupils by providing them with examples of "successful" people. These people were presented as having achieved socially recognised achievements but also as possessing a number of positive features, which were both the outcome and prerequisite for success. These features included material possessions, such as income, and positive personal characteristics, such as benevolence. Through presenting personified examples, the school rendered successful destinations palpable and presented them as desirable to emulate.

In addition to promoting desirable aims, the school was found to illustrate the preconditions for reaching success to the pupils. This included the overarching idea that success was an outcome of internal assets of the individual rather than a product of external circumstances, such as familial background or fate. Thus, the school encouraged the pupils to think that success was possible as it was a consequence of individual ability, paired with certain attitudes and behaviours, such as academic effort, persistence and determination. The idea that success depended on these internal qualities was illustrated to the young people through presenting examples of people from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

The messages given to the pupils mirror the meritocratic ideal promoted in the policy documents. As in the policy documents, the pupils are encouraged to display striving attitudes and rely on their internal assets in order to reach success. In the school, however, there seemed to be a particular emphasis on pointing out the importance of attitudes and behaviours and decisions, which can be seen in the context of the assumptions held by staff on the backgrounds of the young people. Seeing the young people as limited in their knowledge, lacking in confidence, belief and will to be successful, the school targeted young people's attitudes. Promoting attitudes such as "resilience" can be seen as a consequence of acknowledging that young people face

difficulties in realising success and cannot count on support from their immediate environment.

7.3 Implications of the school's enactment of aspiration for young people

The messages on aspiration given by the school have several implications for the young people's understanding of themselves and how they are to envisage and act about their futures after leaving school. Overall, the young people were encouraged to adopt concrete aims, make choices regarding their futures and adopt attitudes and behaviours to pursue these aims. However, not all aims were rendered desirable by the school. By promoting attainment, further educational destinations and highly-qualified occupations, the young people were implicitly called upon to adopt these as their personal aims. This also implies that aims not linked to academic or career achievements were excluded as "thinkable" options. At the same time, however, it was shown that the messages given by the school also suggested that the young people should adopt aims that were suited to their abilities and preferences. Thus, the young people were encouraged to adopt "high aims" and, at the same time, to make individual choices, adapted to their ability and preferences.

Underpinned by the teachers' assumptions that educational achievement was a way for the young people to overcome their position of disadvantage, the school encouraged the young people to invest in educational qualifications – ideally in the form of Higher Education in order to reach more highly rewarded occupations and thus a better standard of living. The school's messages thus presented both a promise and a call on young people to escape from their present life circumstances. For the young people, this suggested an expectation to pursue different educational and occupational routes from their parents and implies a demand to live a different life and dissociate (mentally and geographically) from their immediate environment. This went along with a call to develop attitudes and behaviours, such as being more geographically mobile, having the confidence to do so, and exploring what is unfamiliar in order to be able to envisage a wider range of future aims.

The assumption that the young people should develop attitudes that allowed them to realise their "potential" and be educationally successful, was conveyed to the young people though the message that success in life depended on individual merits, such as talent, effort and will rather than on social background. Thus, the young people are encouraged to rely on their own internal assets in order to reach the aims presented as desirable. More specifically, the young people were called upon to adopt a positive attitude towards educational achievement, as well as to become self-reliant, determined and academically hard-working people. By suggesting that their immediate environments influenced them negatively, the young people were, moreover, called upon to free themselves from the negative influences around them and make their own, independent decisions. This suggests that the young people are encouraged and given the responsibility to transform themselves in order to transform their circumstances.

Chapter 8: Negotiating ideas on aspiration

This chapter presents evidence on how the young people understood and negotiated the messages on after-school futures as conveyed by the school and how they constructed futures drawing on different discursive offers. The first and second section build on the findings from the previous chapter as to how the school conveyed ideas on aspiration, firstly in the form of ideas on desirable aims and secondly, by promoting certain individual attitudes and behaviours. Section 8.1 focuses on the young people's perception of Higher Education and related occupations as desirable aims and shows both how these aims were perceived generally by the young people and in relation to themselves. The subsequent section, 8.2., then shows how the young people in the study negotiated the idea that success was dependent on individual behaviours and attitudes. As it was found that most of the young people who participated in the study did not identify personally with Higher Education, section 8.3 illustrates how these young people rendered their occupational aims valuable. This is followed by a section (8.4.) which illustrates how the young people in the study imagined their future lives more generally. Summarising the findings, the final section (8.5) identifies how the young people negotiated the "moral obligations" placed on them in the school and which discursive elements they drew on when constructing desirable forms of "being" and "acting".

The evidence presented in this chapter stems from 10 group discussions comprising a total of 36 pupils and from individual interviews with 10 pupils. At the time of the study, the interviewed pupils attended the year groups S4-S6. For a more detailed overview of the groups and individual pupils see Sections 5.4.4 and 5.4.5.

8.1 Negotiating Higher Education and professional destinations

The evidence indicates that attending university and getting a university degree was equated with success by the pupils. This could be seen in various reactions to the board in the Board of Achievements (see Section 7.2.1), such as the following one:

Pupil 2: You have to be successful obviously to go on the Board of Achievements.

Konstanze: And what would that be – 'successful'?

Pupil 3: Go to university or something. Study. (Group 4)

In addition to equating attending university with success, several young people described university – and occupations linked to it – with attributes that indicate magnitude and esteem. This was often coupled with the perception that people who studied or had a degree from Higher Education were exceptionally intelligent. The young people expressed this by describing university as "big", and seeing people who attended or graduated from university as being a "genius" and "really smart". This suggests that for most of the interviewed young people, university was perceived as a special and grand achievement, which was based on extraordinary innate ability. Not all of the young people, however, saw Higher Education and associated professions as an (achievable) aim for themselves.

The following sections illustrate how the young people thought about Higher Education and associated occupations in relation to themselves. It was found that only the pupils with high attainment in school construed these aims as desirable and achievable for themselves, a position which will be illustrated in the first section. The subsequent section shows how a second group of pupils perceived university as a desirable destination but one they saw as not (immediately) achievable. The third section presents the accounts of young people in which Higher Education was absent or rejected. It is illustrated how this group questioned the value of academic attainment both at a personal and general level.

8.1.1 Gaining recognition and an affluent lifestyle

Most of the young people who presented Higher Education and related occupations as desirable aims for themselves mentioned the prospect of gaining social recognition, as well as leading a more affluent life, as motivators. Higher Education was presented both as an aim in itself and a key to higher status occupations, which in turn promised high incomes and a more affluent lifestyle.

A university degree was itself associated with the receiving esteem by other people:

> *Pupil 1: It's like when you say oh I went to university, people seem to get a picture in their head, right.*
>
> *Robert: It's just people think you're really, really smart.*
>
> *Pupil 1: But if you say: I did an apprenticeship, they don't, it's not the same standard. Right enough, I don't think they look down on you, but they still… I think the way they look at you is a bit different.*
>
> *Robert: 'Oh, I've got, I've got a degree from [university name]', they just think you're a genius. (Group 8)*

> *Obviously, it looks good when you're writing your name: [own name], PhD (Group 10)*

These quotes illustrate that the pupils portray attending university as attractive by mentioning the positive impression that they think a degree from university makes on other people. In the first quote the two pupils refer explicitly to the high respect they expect to get from other people ("the way they look at you is a bit different"). Robert, moreover, links a university degree with extraordinary intelligence ("they just think you're a genius"). The assumption that attending a university earns respect from others is also made by comparing university with an apprenticeship.

Similarly, young people in a different group discussion contrasted the esteem that a brain surgeon earns with that of someone employed in a fast-food restaurant:

> *You're sitting down at a table and someone is saying, 'I'm a brain surgeon, I'm curing cancers' and you say, 'I work in McDonalds.' How does that sound? (Group 9)*

These quotes indicate that the young people attribute different levels of status to different educational and occupational destinations, with university and professional occupations located at the top. Drawing on this hierarchy of respect, they present university degrees and professional occupations as desirable aims.

Yet, earning a university degree and professional occupations were not only described as promising rewards in terms of status, but also with regard to their

financial returns. Particularly professional occupations, such as doctor/General Practitioner (GP), vet or engineer were described as attractive because they promised "big pay" (Group 9) and earning "up to a hundred thousand" (Greg). A high income was equalled with success and portrayed as attractive because it enabled people to desirable possessions. In Greg's case, his aim of becoming a GP was associated with the prospect of having an affluent lifestyle:

> *I'd like to, probably like to live, somewhere like, [name of affluent neighbourhood] or somethin' like that, just outside [name of city] or Florida. (…) I'd like to have a house with three or four bedrooms and a back garden, and that would be something.*

By mentioning the wish to acquire possessions, such as a house in an affluent area or an expensive car, the young people expressed a wish to acquire visible attributes of success. The wish for social ascent was expressed in terms of being materially well-off and having high social status and was presented as a motivation for envisaging professional occupations.

"Higher" educational qualifications in the form of a university degree and "Highers" in school were seen by most pupils as a precondition to reach "better" occupations:

> *Pupil 1: Why do you want to go to university?*
>
> *Pupil 2: Because I think you have a better chance to get a job when you leave. You get a better job, you got more options open.*
>
> *Pupil 3: There's more stuff you can do, 'cause with a lot of jobs you can't really, it's harder if you don't have a degree. (Group 8)*

> *I think I'm gonna stay on till sixth year and just see. Hopefully I can get five Highers, and that will, that will open more doors and opportunities and everything, so that will be good, if I can get them – that'd be good. (Fiona)*

> *Yeah, but I mean the advantage of going to college or university, I mean, as well as looking good on your CV, it's, it just opens a lot of higher up jobs and maybe just like going five years to university is worth that. (Group 9)*

The quotes show that the pupils render Higher Education attractive by linking it to the promise of accessing a wider range of occupations ("more options open"),

including those perceived as higher in the hierarchy of occupations ("better job", "higher up jobs"). By pointing out that the time spent at university is "worth" it, the pupil in the latter quote articulates the assumption that investing in educational qualifications (here in the form of an investment of time) pays off occupationally. This assumption is also voiced in the following quote:

> *Konstanze: So would you also stay on at school even if you don't like it?*
>
> *Several pupils: Uh hmm, yeah.*
>
> *Pupil 1: Aha, if you can't get a job, so.*
>
> *Pupil 2: Aye, because.*
>
> *Pupil 1: It's only a few years in your life and you got like, sometimes thirty years left at working, so.*
>
> *Pupil 3: Making the most of it. (Group 9)*

By pointing out that staying on at school leads to occupational opportunities that would not exist without qualifications ("if you can't get a job") and referring to staying on at school as a relative small investment ("only a few years in your life"), the pupils portray educational participation as a worthy investment, although the experience might be unpleasant. Overall, the quotes on the "returns" of educational qualifications suggest that the pupils saw them as a key that opens up a wider range of opportunities and allows access to "higher" valued occupations.

While some of the young people tended to present Higher Education and related occupations as attractive for their material and status gains, others tended to describe these aims as attractive because they corresponded with their perceived capabilities and preferences. The following section will therefore illustrate how the young people drew on these "internal" benefits when presenting Higher Education as a desirable aim.

8.1.2 Realising interests and abilities

Some young people presented the idea that studying at university is attractive by indicating that it corresponded with their preferred activities and interests. For them, university promised the chance to study an enjoyable subject, to learn in an academic manner, or to pursue a career aligned with their interest and capabilities. For Robert,

going to university meant that he could study his area of interest – electronics – in more depth than through other routes:

> *Because we don't really get to do that when you're doing like, say you're doing computing, it's all more in-depth in university, obviously. That's what I like, I like to know how things work.*

For Pauline, the wish to go to university was bound up with the chance to become a teacher, which she portrayed as suited to her interests and abilities. Moreover, Pauline identified further benefits that university offered in contrast with other educational routes:

> *I think maybe it [university] would develop you more as a person, more than college or an apprenticeship would. I think you maybe meet more people if you went to university and you would maybe get involved more.*

The quote shows that Pauline imagined university as not only attractive for subject-related reasons, but also for her personal development. As Robert and Pauline's examples showed, different motives were interlinked; studying at university was seen as attractive in itself, as well as a means to reach a desirable occupational aim which, again, was associated with several benefits.

For another pupil, university was seen less as a way to realise a specific career aim than a way to continue studying the subjects she liked in school:

> *I want to go to university because, it maybe sounds really weird, but I actually enjoy learning the things and all that so just continue that, basically (...) university, sort of continuation of Highers and Advanced Highers and things. (Group 10)*

While this pupil presented university as a means to continue learning, others saw it as a way to reach an occupation which corresponded with their interests and abilities:

> *I've been told by a couple teachers that I would be a really good teacher and I do enjoy bossing people about. And I would like making other people interested in subjects, 'cause I'm interested in them and it would be nice to make other people passionate about. (Pauline)*
>
> *I've always been interested in electronics, like, from a young age, 'cause I mean when I was young, I would just take things apart to see how they work*

and just, it's just a hobby, then I do it every now and again, so I mean if it's something I like, it's something I can make a job out of as well (...). (Robert)

This way of presenting one's occupational aim as a way of realising long-harboured dream was found among other pupils as well (see Section 8.3.2). It tended to be expressed in conjunction with occupations which did not require a Higher Education degree. For Robert, however, his long-term interest in electronics had been transformed into a destination (engineering) that required a university degree.

The analysis presented above suggests that these young people adopted the 'demand' by the school to pursue Higher Education and highly-qualified occupations. When describing these aims as desirable, they furthermore drew on different ideas present in the school: in some instances on the credentialist "logic" that Higher Education led to more highly-qualified occupations and consequently to a higher standard of living; and in other instances on the assumption that Higher Education and highly-qualified occupations were suited to their abilities and preferences. Their constructions of the benefits of Higher Education and professional occupations thus converged with the "higher morals" of "realising potential" and preferences and living a "better life" presented by the school. By perceiving a Higher Education degree as a way to gain recognition from others, the pupils furthermore seemed to draw on the school's messages on success, which presented Higher Education as a special achievement and linked it to fame.

The following section will present data from young people who saw Higher Education as generally valuable but not (immediately) achievable.

8.1.3 Higher Education as distant or not achievable

A number of young people presented Higher Education as a positive aim, but one that they either did not consider achievable or only achievable at a later point. They explained this by referring to the impossibility to meet requirements that were needed to access or succeed in Higher Education. They varied, however, in the extent to which they saw themselves able to meet these requirements in the future.

Those young people who envisaged entering Higher Education at a later stage tended to use images of distance, describing it as a "big step" or a "big jump", an expression which reoccurred in interviews and observations. According to these young people this idea was based on not feeling "ready" for university. This feeling took on different forms with different pupils. Pauline, for example, doubted that she could successfully deal with the forms of instruction at university which she saw as different from school:

> *I just feel like in school you're sort of spoon fed everything, like I got a mentor recently (…) and I don't think you get that in uni, someone to sit down with you and make sure you know what you're doing. I think it's just a big jump as soon you got into uni.*

For Pauline, university was a "big jump" because of its demand to learn independently, for which she felt unprepared. Other pupils, like Sean, named several requirements that he felt he could not yet meet:

> *Konstanze: So for you going directly to uni wouldn't be an option?*
>
> *Sean: No, I think that would be too fast for me. I think I would need a lot of brains and you need to stay on and not have a social life I think, so to go straight to uni I think that would be a big step, so I think I'd rather work before I do actually start uni. So I would rather just go to college and gradually build up to be able to go to uni, I think that would be a safer option.*

This quote suggests that Sean saw university as requiring intelligence ("I would need a lot of brains"), qualifications ("need to stay on") and sacrifice ("not have a social life"). Sean saw himself as not meeting these requirements, but at the same time he does not present this as a reason to give up on the aim of going to university. Instead, he envisaged getting to university via work or college, and thus gradually getting equipped ("build up") with the necessary skills. Sean therefore presented college as the "safer option" at the present moment. He further elaborated on the reasons for this:

> *Because I think if I went straight into uni, I don't think I would like it as much. I think it would be too hard for me and then I would just give up and then end up not wanting to do anything.*

For Sean, going to university straight after school seems to be linked to the possibility of not meeting the demands and, therefore, giving up his future plans altogether. It thus seems to be bound up with risk of failure, which is seen as possibly avoidable by taking an indirect, "safe" route.

Similar to Sean, Robert spoke about not meeting university entrance requirements and thus planning to take a different route:

> *I realised, I think I need to get three Bs and a C. And I need to get a B in Chemistry, which, I mean it's not going to happen. (...) So I just, obviously I just go to college, safer to go that way, do you know what I mean? Through college and then to university.*

Like Sean, Robert presents entering university via college as "safer". In contrast with Sean, however, Robert does not express this by referring to intelligence or motivation, but with reference to not meeting formal entry criteria.

The association of certain aims with a risk of failure was made by other pupils as well. In contrast with the pupils cited above, these young people did not refer to Higher Education and saw possible failure as a reason for abandoning their dreams:

> *We're [herself and her friend] scared if we try something in case we fail at it. We're scared of failing. Like the unrealistic things that, I don't know if somebody wants to be a singer and you really wanted to be, I'd be too scared to try and be one, I'd just try and go for something that is safe and that I know I could get. (Group 5)*

The terminology used by the pupil ("try", "really wanted to be") resonates with the rhetoric in the school on the value of adopting personally relevant aims and pursuing them with persistent effort. However, like the pupils above, this pupil associated pursuing desirable, yet distant, aims with possible failure and explains abandoning these aims by referring to a wish for "safety".

Besides the young people who saw Higher Education as desirable but not within their immediate reach, there were other young people who presented Higher Education as not achievable. These young people tended to present extraordinary intelligence as a

prerequisite for accessing university. They expressed this perception by referring to acquaintances who had gone to university or entered respected occupations:

> *Pupil 1: My cousin, [name] is on that [the Board of Achievements]!*
> *Pupil 2: I know her.*
> *Pupil 1: She got a job, she works in a bank, she's smart, so she is! (Group 4)*

> *Cause like my big cousin, he's like in a big university, he's like a really, I mean he wants to be a psychologist, so he's really smart and like my big sister's friend, she's, she wants to be a surgeon, and she's like, just, at least everybody I know are really smart. (Group 5)*

> *My big cousin went to college and then to university and he's really smart, so, and he got his like graduation thing and all that, so. (Megan)*

The pupils in the quotes above seemed to draw on people they know as evidence to validate their perception that exceptional intelligence is required to study at university and perform certain occupations (such as working in a bank, being a psychologist, being a surgeon). They seem to emphasise this by using terms like "really smart", "big university", "so she is!". The perception that attending and getting access to university required extraordinary intelligence and attainment was also used as an explanation for not adopting Higher Education as a personal aim:

> *Konstanze: Did you ever consider going to university?*
> *Megan: No. That's just too clever and that.*

> *Pupil 3: I keep thinking like university, that's only for like smart people to get in.*
> *Konstanze: How do you know that other people are smarter?*
> *Pupil 3: Because most of, everybody that's in, that I know is in university, they're like really, really smart, intelligent people and I'm not.*
> *Konstanze: How do you know that?*
> *Pupil 3: I don't know, it's just everybody in university to me all seems very smart and intelligent. I'm not saying that's not a good thing, I wish I was smart, but I'm not smart. (Group 5)*

Konstanze: Would that [university] be an option for you? (…)

Pupil 1: I wouldn't be able to get in there. I'm not smart enough. (Group 4)

The quotes show that the pupils present university as not achievable by referring to their own perceived deficit in intelligence. In the second quote, the pupil states that she accepts the idea of university being a valuable destination, but presents it as unachievable due to not being intelligent enough. She presents her perceived absence of intelligence as regrettable ("I wish I was smart").

Besides referring to the incongruence between their own intelligence and that required for Higher Education, the young people described university as intimidating. One way of expressing this can be illustrated in the following quote, in which Megan mentions the daunting idea of a graduation ceremony:

> *Megan: My big cousin went to college and then to university and he's really smart so and he got his like graduation thing and all that, so.*
>
> *Konstanze: So a ceremony and everything?*
>
> *Megan: Uhum, he's done that, so.*
>
> *Konstanze: Did you find that quite attractive or? Like graduating…*
>
> *Megan: I find it quite scary, it's like I don't know. Got your graduation and it's pure big.*

Using expressions like "big" and "scary", Megan's statement suggests that university is seen as daunting and thus not a desirable aim for her. The tendency to describe university as something that induces fear could also be observed in several informal conversations with pupils in which they compared the pre-1992 university in the city with "Hogwarts" (boarding school known through the novels of "Harry Potter"). Referring to the impression the old buildings had on them, they said it seemed frightening to them. This was paired with the idea that access to this university required almost unreachable attainment ("you need like ten As"). In their accounts, as well as in Megan's, (a certain type of) university was perceived as daunting due to its awe-inspiring outward impression paired with ideas of having to be an extraordinarily intelligent person.

The analysis of young people's accounts presented suggests that these young people aligned themselves with the idea promoted by the school that Higher Education was a desirable destination. The way they negotiated university suggests that they recognised the demand to "aim high". However, in contrast with the pupils in the previous section, they did not adopt this 'demand' in the sense of presenting Higher Education as an immediate personal aim. Instead, these pupils, in some instances, described Higher Education as not immediately achievable due to their lack of meeting the requirements (drawing on images of distance) and as bound up with the risk of failure. In other instances, the young people excluded university as an aim for themselves by drawing on their perceived lack of intelligence (and by linking Higher Education with images of intimidating symbols of prestige). Thus, these young people seem to deploy the idea in the school that Higher Education is a special achievement in order to describe it as not (immediately) achievable for themselves. At the same time, the young people's constructions of an individual deficit seem to diverge with the school's idea of innate ability and the message that it is possible to reach any aim given the 'right' attitude.

Having presented the data from young people who portrayed Higher Education as a desirable – albeit not always attainable – aim, the following section will present accounts in which Higher or Further Education destinations did not feature at all, or were rejected as undesirable.

8.1.4 Higher Education absent or rejected

There were a number of young people who did not mention Higher Education explicitly. Some referred to "college" instead of university, which indicates that Higher Education might not have been a "thinkable" destination for them. These pupils however did discuss high educational achievement and the acquisition of post-school qualifications. They did this either by rejecting the value of acquiring qualifications generally or by setting themselves apart from young people who pursued these destinations or aspired to reach them.

In contrast with the pupils' views presented above, two pupils in a group discussion rejected the value of educational qualifications by questioning the rationale endorsed by the school and most other young people that leaving school leads to more opportunities on the labour market. They did this by doubting the teachers' warning that they would not get a job upon leaving school:

> *Pupil 1: All the teachers put you down and say when you leave school you're never gonna get a job and that but [undecipherable]*
>
> *Pupil 2: It's weird man.*
>
> *Pupil 1: Obviously you can get a job pure easy. I just left college for one day and I got a course, like exactly the same day. (Group 1)*

The excerpt above illustrates how these young people tried to prove the teachers' assumption wrong by drawing on their own experience of securing a destination (here referring to a college course). They further express their view by predicting that higher qualifications from school will not help their fellow pupils to obtain work:

> *Pupil 1: So no matter who, and how smart you are just, they might, some of them might not get a job. All that Highers they've got.*
>
> *Pupil 2: I know people who are pure daft and they've got jobs.*
>
> *Pupil 1: (…) they are actually pure addicts.*
>
> *Pupil 1: Just because they think they are pure good and they think they're just gonna walk into a job easy 'cause 'oh my grades, bump my job', but that's nothin'. (Group 1)*

These pupils seemed to assume that intelligence ("how smart you are") and qualifications were not necessarily useful when seeking work. They underlined this by expressing the perception that people with little intelligence ("daft") and low social reputation ("addicts") do have jobs. Besides rejecting intelligence and qualifications as requirements for accessing employment, one pupil pointed out what he regarded to be crucial instead:

> *What you know is who you know, I think, it is. 'Cause it's (?) if you know somebody who owns somethin' you gonna say to them, try and give me a job and I'll prove I can keep it or somethin'. (Group 1)*

By referring to the importance of personal relationships ("who you know") and displaying skills ("prove I can keep it"), this pupil seemed to suggest a logic that contrasted with that of the teachers and the pupils aiming for higher qualifications in school. Anticipating that this strategy will lead to employment, the pupil presented himself and other early school leavers as potentially more successful than the high achievers:

> *But they [the teachers] obviously think they [the high achievers]'re gonna have a bright future and get the job that they want (...) but then if you ask us, what we want to do when we are leaving, they [the teachers] don't know because, they don't know if we're gonna be successful. (Group 1)*

By indicating that the teachers would not know about their trajectories after leaving school, the pupil seems to counter the teachers' assumption that pupils like him will not be successful with regard to realising their occupational aims. The statement that the teachers thought the high-achieving pupils would have a "bright future", suggests that the pupil negotiates statements in which teachers praise the high attaining pupils (see Section 7.2.1).

Although not explicitly questioning the school's message as the pupils above, two other pupils imagined relying on strategies other than formal educational qualifications. While one pupil expected to find work in a relative's hairdressing shop, another pupil envisaged accessing employment through a sequence of jobs:

> *If somebody wanted to find a job, if they want a job and do that one, they'll find it. It's just getting to get a job right now and just work and then until something else comes along that's better, then take that obviously. (Michael)*

The young people who did not see educational qualifications as valuable in terms of getting work did not usually discuss destinations like university directly. However, there were instances in which they set themselves apart from young people who attended college or attained highly in school. In one group discussion, for example, the idea of going to college was described as unattractive because of differences between themselves and college students:

> *Pupil: I don't even want to go to college, it's quite depressing, I cannae stand all these mad guys with their hair.*

(Laughter)

Pupil: I wouldn't fit in.

Pupil: With the Goths (...).

Pupil: You need to be skinny, pure skinny, skinny, I would hate that, man. (Group 3)

The pupils in the excerpt rejected attending college by making reference to the physical appearance ("skinny", "mad guys with their hair") of college students, which they describe as unattractive. By distancing themselves from the students' way of "being", these young people presented college as an environment where they would not "fit in".

In another group discussion, the pupils did not discuss specific destinations, but achievement in school. They described high attainment as an undesirable aim, relating it to the sacrifices this entails with regard to having a "social life":

> *Pupil 1: They [the high attaining pupils] work hard as well but, but they, they are the kind of people who just don't go out and they don't go out the house, they just stay in.*
>
> *Pupil 2: They've not got a social life.*
>
> *Pupil 1: (...) people who don't do that much. We, we go and do stuff.*
>
> *Pupil 2: You can't exactly just have a good education and just sit in the house all day, you need to have a good social life as well, because it's better when I've got a social life and I get education as well.*
>
> *Pupil 1: We balance it out and they don't. (Group 1)*

The interviewees described the high attaining pupils as having an undesirable lifestyle, characterised by a lack of enjoyment and sociability. In turn, they portrayed themselves as striking the right balance between education and enjoyment outside school. Thus, similar to young people in the quote above these pupils present disparities between themselves and people with higher attainment at school in terms of lifestyle.

However, these young people also admitted that while they did not want to live the life of the high attaining young people they presented the idea of having intelligence as attractive:

> *Konstanze: So you wouldn't want to swap with them [the high attaining pupils]?*
>
> *Pupil 1: No!*
>
> *Pupil 2: No, I wouldn't actually; I like what I've done.*
>
> *Pupil 3: If I had a chance to, if just to get their brains, I would obviously take them, but…*
>
> *Pupil 2: But I'd do this again.*
>
> *Konstanze: If you had a chance to do …?*
>
> *Pupil 3: Be, just be myself but be as smart as them. (Group 1)*

The discussion among the pupils suggests ambivalence between the wish to be "smart" and the (undesirable) prospect of leading the life of the "smart". This can also be illustrated by the last sentence in which the pupil expressed the idea of maintaining his identity ("be myself") while being equally intelligent. This suggests that for these pupils, becoming "smart" seemed to be inseparable from becoming a different person.

In another group discussion, the pupils also distanced themselves from the "smart" ones by portraying them as arrogant and focussed on school:

> *Pupil 1: I think the smart people think too much of themselves for being smart, if you get what I mean. (…)*
>
> *Pupil 2: Anyway, they, they just choose to be together like at lunchtime and that. And down at the shopping centre at lunch time they still talk about school even though it's lunchtime and you are meant to be talking about, like whatever. (Group 6)*

Like the pupils above, the interviewees expressed a dislike of the high achievers by describing them as too concentrated on school (talking about school at lunchtime). Over the course of the group discussion, however, these pupils showed more regret about not attaining higher grades (see also Section 8.2.2). Their rejection of high

educational attainment was therefore more ambivalent than that displayed in the other accounts presented in this section.

This evidence above suggests that these pupils rejected the demand to adopt Higher or Further Education as a personal aim. They did this, firstly, by rejecting the idea of being or becoming a high-achieving person (equated with being "smart"), which was related to leading an undesirable lifestyle (leading an unsociable life, focussed on school work), to losing one's identity and to being physically unattractive. Secondly, Higher Education was rejected as a personal aim by challenging the credentialist messages of the school, that is that Higher Education led to better opportunities on the labour market. This suggests two ways of rejecting the 'demand' to 'aim high': by resisting it at an identity level and by conceptually challenging the credentialist discourse. The described ways of rejecting the demand to "aim high" by the young people were in some instances interrelated with presenting themselves as superior to the high-achieving pupils. These young people described themselves as living a more balanced lifestyle and as knowing how to be successful on the labour market (that is through personal contacts and proving one's skills instead of educational qualifications), which indicates a rejection of being positioned as potentially unsuccessful by teachers.

8.1.5 Section summary and link to school messages

The data presented in this section indicates that the young people seemed to recognise the demand to aim for Higher Education and highly-qualified occupations. These destinations were mostly associated with social esteem and specialness by the young people, which was linked to the idea that Higher Education required extraordinary intelligence. One group of pupils saw Higher Education also as personally desirable. Converging with the school's messages, they adopted the credentialist assumption that Higher Education was linked to the possibility of realising "better" occupational aims, as well as assuming that they would gain recognition for their achievements. Realising "better" occupational aims, as well as attending university was assumed to lead to a more materially affluent life, or to realising one's preferences and abilities.

Other young people portrayed their deficit in intelligence as a reason for not envisaging Higher Education and related occupations as a destination. Aiming for Higher Education – at least at the present stage – was associated with a risk of failure. Nevertheless, there was also the idea that requirements for university could be acquired via attending other destinations, particularly college. A further group of pupils either did not talk about Higher and Further Education or rejected these destinations. They did so, firstly, at an identity level by distancing themselves from high attaining young people whose lifestyle and physical appearance they described as not compatible with theirs. Secondly, there were a few young people who rejected pursuing higher qualifications by questioning the credentialist rationale and presenting a counter logic, referring to other assets such as social networks as superior in value on the labour market. This position seemed to be a reaction against being described as potentially unsuccessful by teachers.

While the previous section illustrated the young peoples' perception and negotiation of aims after leaving school, the next section shows how the young people negotiated ideas on individual attitudes and behaviours as preconditions for success.

8.2 Negotiating ideas on individual preconditions for success

This section presents how the young people made sense of the idea that their future depends on individual assets such as ability, will and effort. The first part illustrates how the higher attaining pupils attributed educational success to individual attitude and will. The second part describes the ambivalent position mainly adopted by lower attaining pupils, who oscillated between making their own behaviour, their intelligence or the support by teachers responsible for their outcomes in school. The final part presents the reactions of a small group of young people who did not discuss these ideas on an abstract level but ridiculed the school's messages or showed themselves unaffected by their content.

8.2.1 Success as dependent on the individual ("it's your attitude")

The more highly attaining pupils aligned themselves closely with the idea that success – particularly success in the form of attainment in school – was a matter of individual choice and will. Reacting to the school motto, these pupils stated that success was up to the individual:

> *Pupil 1: I think everybody can get success, but they need to try to get successful.*
>
> *Pupil 2: Need to want.*
>
> *Pupil 3: Aye, want to try.*
>
> *Pupil 1: It's your attitude mainly.*
>
> *Pupil 2: Aye, most important. (Group 9)*

A similar assumption was made when the pupils discussed their understanding of a slogan on a poster which read "You are who you choose to be.":

> *Konstanze: What does it depend on …?*
>
> *Pupil 1: Your attitude.*
>
> *Konstanze: … that you can choose who you want to be?*
>
> *Pupil 1: Your attitude to life, 'cause if you want to be, you got to try better obviously, so. I don't know what to say.*
>
> *Konstanze: So do you all think the same – that it depends on your attitude?*
>
> *Pupil 2: Probably, and the support you get. (Group 9)*

Both quotes indicate that the pupils assumed that a person's achievements, as well as their life outcomes, depended on their effort ("you got to try better") and "attitude". Although, after probing, one of the pupils mentioned support as a further possible requirement, the pupils seemed to agree that characteristics residing in the individual were crucial.

This assumption was also expressed in two group discussions in which the pupils state that the responsibility for success lies with the pupils rather than teachers:

> *I think there's only a certain amount a school can implement on you. I mean fair enough you turn up every day. But it's you at the end of the day that has to be successful; it's not the school's responsibility. (Group 10)*

While in the previous excerpt the young people highlight the limited influence of external agents on pupils' success, the young people in the following discussion present willingness to learn as a criterion for deserving the teachers' attention:

> *Pupil 1: But I mean every period that you spend teaching like people who don't want to learn, that's a period you can't teach people that do want to learn.*
>
> *Pupil 2: Aye, but it's in the school motto, it says [school motto], so it's really not fair if you're actually just leaving them behind.*
>
> *Pupil 3: Aye, but they're not trying to be successful.*
>
> *Pupil 4: They're not, they don't.*
>
> *Konstanze: They shouldn't leave some behind.*
>
> *Pupil 5: Aye, they [the pupils] should make the best effort they can. Success for all that want it. (Group 9)*

Although the opinion is not unanimous, more pupils express the view that pupils who are not willing to learn do not deserve to be taught. Talking about other pupils ("they"), these pupils presented themselves as the willing ones in contrast with the other, less willing pupils. The distinction was also made by another pupil:

> *But then I think there is either one end where everybody really wants to achieve and there is another end where people probably could achieve, but don't, so knowing you can, but deciding you won't, basically. They could, but they decide not to, can't be bothered working, not motivated. (Group 10)*

The pupil in the quote presents educational achievement as an individual choice. By pointing out that the attainment by her fellow pupils is not a matter of ability ("could achieve"), she further stresses the importance of individual attitude. She thus echoes the teachers' assumptions that the young people in the school are innately able and that a combination of ability, willingness and (persistent) effort lead to success.

Besides discussing the importance of individual attitudes generally and with reference to their fellow pupils, some high attaining pupils also drew on their own experience in order to substantiate this view. One pupil traced high attainment of her year group back to the pupils' willingness and their competitive behaviour:

> *Konstanze: Regarding the exams last year, why do you think your group was better compared to others?*

Pupil: I just think, mostly, our year group was more willing to be successful. We want to be, so, [and we] competed [more] and quite a lot of people I know. (Group 10)

Another pupil drew on his personal experience to point to the positive consequences of a change in attitude:

See last year, I wasn't very good, I wasn't getting good marks and, but this year I came back, busy, working, I just worked and then got the better marks, so obviously I can do it, so, I changed my mindset. (Group 9)

Leading to more effort ("busy, working") and better attainment ("better marks"), Robert presents his change of his attitude ("mindset") as the initiating factor on his way to higher attainment. In contrast with some other high attaining pupils, he presented his willingness to strive for "higher aims" as a recent decision and seemed to defend the assumption of success as an outcome of individual choice and effort more vigorously.

Thus, while all of the higher attaining pupils agreed with the idea of individual responsibility for outcomes, only some presented them as guiding their own actions. Others showed themselves unaffected and analysed the purpose behind the posters displayed in the school and the way they were presented. These pupils seemed to adopt a similar perspective to the teachers by speculating about the possible benefits and effect the posters could have on (other) pupils.

When discussing the possibility of individuals influencing their outcomes, some of the high attaining pupils also pointed out that intelligence, as well as the potential to be successful, were independent of social circumstances. Defending the idea that people in the local area were equally intelligent, Pauline stated:

I think outside people have already got an opinion of [name of the local area]: the deprivation, but no, it's not like that at all. I think you have to live in it to understand it. I think we're perfectly capable.

By pointing out that "we're perfectly capable", Pauline rejected the link between the deprivation and low ability she suspects other people make. She echoed the statement

by one of the teachers that the young people had "the potential to achieve just as much as everybody else" (see Section 7.1.2). A further pupil negated the influence of circumstances by pointing out that success was possible regardless of one's background. In order to make her point, she referred to the story of Ben Carson (see Section 7.2.2):

> *It shows that no matter where you come from, you can still be <u>that</u> successful, which is quite successful. I think it shows that <u>this</u> area isn't always, like, isn't the best area, so it sort of shows that you can, when you come like from [local area] or [city], whatever, it shows that you can be whatever you want to be. (Group 10)*

Drawing on the Ben Carson story, the pupil expressed the view that outcomes are due to an individual's decisions and are limitless ("whatever you want to be"). The pupil thus agreed with the school's message that success depends on individual assets rather than external circumstances and that the individual is consequently not limited in what they can achieve.

In another group discussion, a pupil commented on the idea that any aim was achievable when reacting to a poster which stated that it was the individual's responsibility to decide on their future. The pupil saw this as a promise that could not be fulfilled for everybody:

> *This one, it kind of, it gives people false hope: "you are who you choose to be". If somebody like didn't do very good at school wants to do something, wants to go to uni, but might not get there, they're not gonna get there, because of the way they act, the way they are. It's false hope, do you know what I mean? (Group 9)*

In this pupil's view, not every pupil is capable of realising any aim because of the "way they are", indicating that individual characteristics, such as behaviour and attitude ("the way they act", "the way they are") are a necessary prerequisite for realising one's aims. His statement thus confirms the message promoted by the school that individual attitudes or behaviours are crucial for realising success.

The following section will illustrate the ambivalent positions taken up by lower attaining pupils. They also assumed success as linked to individual effort, but at the same time tried to explain their own attainment by drawing on a range of explanations, thus oscillating between adopting and refuting the efficacy of individual effort.

8.2.2 Negotiating individual responsibility for success with low attainment

At a general level, most of the lower attaining pupils aligned themselves with ideas of individual responsibility for educational and other outcomes. As shown in the following two quotes, they attributed pupils' success in school to their effort and persistence:

> *Konstanze: So you would say: [repeats school motto on success] – depends.*
> *Pupils: Aye.*
> *Pupil: It depends on like students, if they try hard enough.*
> *Pupil: Everybody can achieve when they put their mind to it. (Group 2)*

> *Because people give up all the time, but if you just tried a bit more, you could be successful instead of just giving up. (Group 6)*

> *Basically, the more times you practice, the more chance you get it. And if you want a grade, say like in PE [Physical Education], if I wanted a grade, that I want to get, if I want to get a higher grade, I basically need to keep studying, stick in and hopefully get the grade I want. (Group 9)*

These pupils seem to voice the same opinion as the more highly attaining pupils, although they used more colloquial language ("tried", "stick in", "put their mind to it") and referred to effort rather than choice and attitudes. The statements related to effort and persistence ("instead of just giving up") seemed to echo the teachers' messages in the classroom about the importance of not being discouraged by failure (see Section 7.2.2).

While most of the lower attaining pupils subscribed to the idea that effort led to success, they sometimes grappled with the idea when speaking about their own

attainment in school. Some of them put their own attainment down to their lack of effort:

> *Konstanze: What would that mean 'when you put your mind to it'? That you concentrate and study? Do you think the school is quite good at that?*
> *Pupils: Don't know.*
> *Konstanze: Do you feel you are successful?*
> *Pupil: No, because I don't concentrate or listen. (Group 2)*

The excerpt suggests that this pupil saw her own "lack" of success as an outcome of not displaying effort. The pupil thus aligned herself conceptually with the logic of effort and presents her behaviour as not compliant. In another group discussion, the young people also traced their attainment to their effort and behaviour:

> *Pupil 1: Aye (sighs) If I had tried in maths, I know I could be doing like such good Highers and that. But I didn't. I was thrown out of the class three times.*
> *Pupil 2: I wanted to put down maths, but she [the teacher] told me not to.*
> *Pupil 1: See if my behaviour was better in like third year, I think I would have done well.*
> *Pupil 3: You end up regretting being bad, because it will come back to you (...). (Group 6)*

Expressing the assumption that their attainment would have been better had they displayed better behaviour, these pupils confirmed the assumption that individual effort affects their own achievement. Instead of speaking about "attitude" as the high-attaining pupils did, these pupils refer to "being bad" and negative "behaviour". In the last statement the pupil shows awareness of the negative consequences of this, demonstrating regret about the missed chance to potentially achieve better grades.

In addition to seeing their educational outcomes as a result of their own shortcomings, the pupils also attributed responsibility to the teachers. They suspected teachers might not have the best teaching skills: "Sometimes it depends on the teachers though. They might not be very good at teaching." (Group 6) and presented themselves de-motivated by the low expectations of teachers: "but if you were doing

the lower subjects, they [teachers] don't think they [pupils] are good enough to do higher subjects." (Group 6)

The pupils seem to attribute their lack of effort to the low expectations the teachers had for them, compared with the higher attaining pupils. In the following quote they expressed their feeling of being neglected even more strongly:

> *Pupil 1: They [the teachers] can't see past like all the smart people, that's what annoys me.*
>
> *Pupil 2: Like all the smart people get all the credit and then we try our hardest, but we don't get...*
>
> *Pupil 3: We, we get compared to them.*
>
> *Pupil 2: They [the teachers] always prefer the smart people. (Group 6)*

In this quote the pupils present their own effort ("we try our hardest") as futile, because in their perception this is not recognised by the teachers, who are focussed on the more highly attaining pupils. This suggests an assumption that the standard for success is set by the more highly attaining pupils. Another example is expressed in the following excerpt, in which the pupils refer to an experience by a fellow pupil:

> *Pupil 1: My friend, she wants to be a lawyer, but like we were going to that course to like, I think it's like a week or something. We just go to uni for the week and it was for, it was for the lawyers and [fellow pupil] never got picked and she, she said to [name of the teacher] about it, and [name of the teacher] said: we're being realistic for you, we don't expect you to be a lawyer when you leave.*
>
> *Pupil 2: So that [shows] not everybody can do it (…)*
>
> *Pupil 1: If somebody says that to you, you just feel rotten.*
>
> *Pupil 3: Like, there's no point in trying, if people don't think…*
>
> *Pupil 1: You're gonna…*
>
> *Pupil 2: Aye, achieve. (Group 6)*

Besides pointing to the disappointment caused by the teacher's reaction, the teacher's rejection of the fellow pupil's career aim is also seen as evidence for the assumption that not every aim is achievable. The wording by the pupil ("not everybody can do it") echoes the messages in the school on unlimited possibilities. For these pupils, the

idea that everything is possible seemed to give "false hope", as suggested by the pupil above (see Section 8.2.1). As in the previous statement, the pupils conclude from this episode that making an "effort" is futile when there is no recognition of it. The evidence presented above shows how some of the lower-achieving pupils negotiate different, sometimes contradicting, ideas about the relationship between individual attitudes/behaviour and success. While this section has illustrated how some of them grappled with ideas of success and effort, the next section will focus on accounts in which pupils showed themselves unaffected by the messages on individual responsibility.

8.2.3 Rejecting school messages ("it doesn't affect me")

In some group discussions, the young people engaged with ideas on individual attitudes, choice and effort not so much on a conceptual level, but discussed them with irony and presented themselves as annoyed or unaffected by them. The following two excerpts show how young people commented ironically on messages on effort and success, which they had supposedly encountered in the school:

Konstanze: Would that [university] be an option for you? (…)

Pupil 1: I wouldn't be able to get in there. I'm not smart enough.

Konstanze: How do you know?

Pupil 3: You'll need to keep pushing.

(laughter)

Pupil 1: How, what do you need to get into university?

Pupil 3: Achievement for All, [name of pupil 2]. (Group 4)

Konstanze: Any other ideas? What is success?

Pupil (slightly sarcastic): Success? You need to achieve your goal.

(Other pupil laughs)

Pupil: What are you laughing at?

Konstanze: Is that what the teachers say? Achieve your goals?

Pupil: [Referring to what teachers say] Your manners. (Group 3)

While the pupils in the first excerpt pick up on the idea that persistent effort ("need to keep pushing") leads to achievement (that is getting to university) and that thus success is possible for everyone (repeating the school motto), the pupils in the second excerpt repeat the idea of striving towards future aims ("you need to achieve your goal"). The observation that the pupils parody statements present in the school suggests firstly that the pupils are aware of the demands placed on them with regard to behaviour and attitudes, and secondly that they struggle to associate themselves with them.

While the use of irony was one way the pupils reacted to messages on behaviour and attitudes, there were other instances in which they showed more overt rejection. In these instances, the pupils did not comment on the content of messages, but on the presence of the posters and the intention behind them:

> *Konstanze: Why do you think they put them [the 'motivational posters'] up?*
> *Pupil: I don't know, they try and put guilt on you or somethin'.*
> *Pupil: Hmm.*
> *Konstanze: Guilt? Why guilt?*
>
> *Pupil: I don't know, because you get [undecipherable] while you're sitting there [in 'time out', see footnote], while uahh, maybe reading them, bored. (Group 3)*

By suggesting that the intention of the posters is to make pupils feel guilty, the interviewees associate the posters with teachers' hostility towards them.[12] While this indicates that the pupils feel negatively influenced by the posters, a pupil from the same group tried to dispel the idea that he felt personally affected:

> *Konstanze: Guilt because you're not doing what's on them?*
> *Pupil: I don't know, they just make you feel guilty. Doesn't get me, but… I'm a golden boy. (Group 3)*

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[12] The feeling that the posters are a form of punishment might also be due to the fact that the pupils are exposed to the posters while they are in 'time out' – a sanction which means that pupils are asked to leave the classroom and sit silently in an open area in the school.

A further example for showing disaffection can be found in following exchange in which a pupil reacted to the request to explain the meaning of a 'motivational poster':

> *Konstanze: What does it mean to you [Referring to a slogan on 'motivational poster']?*
>
> *Pupil: Nothing. A poster.*
>
> *Pupil: It's just a poster.*
>
> *Pupil: [undecipherable] in the school, they don't mean anything. I can tell you <u>what</u> it means, but it doesn't mean anything to me. (Group 1)*

The pupil refuses to interpret the meaning of the poster – although he shows himself able to do so ("I can tell you <u>what</u> it means") – by pointing out that it has no personal meaning to him. The perception that messages in the school are irrelevant can be further illustrated with the following excerpt in which the pupils commented on a slogan which suggested the importance of not giving up once close to success:

> *Pupil 1: This one here: some people, that's what happens, so there are some people, they're pure close to getting what they want and then they're just: ah, phew, I...*
>
> *Konstanze: So: "many of life's failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up." [Slogan on 'motivational poster']*
>
> *Pupil 2: They were just geared up, they were probably that close to getting what they wanted and they just leave it.*
>
> *Konstanze: Did that ever happen to you, do you think?*
>
> *Pupil 2: See if I was in, something, ah, maths, I don't go to maths anymore, 'cause I just can't learn in it. Not getting my maths now for ten months. (Group 1)*

By illustrating the relevance of persisting in a task by referring to other people, the pupils, on the one hand accepted the idea that individual behaviour impacts on outcomes, but on the other hand did not align themselves with it. Pupil 2 stated this more explicitly when he presented making an effort as not relevant in his situation, as he had stopped attending class. Another pupil expressed the idea that the school messages lack relevance in a slightly different way:

They say that you can get help for later life, but obviously when you are 16, then they don't really care, they are focused on people younger than you. (Group 1)

Similar to the pupil cited before, this pupil seems to see himself beyond the point at which ideas and advice on the post-school future ("later life") have relevance. The perception that the teachers focus their attention on different groups of pupils echoes the assumption by other lower attaining pupils (see Section 8.2.2) and suggests that this group also felt neglected.

The evidence presented in this section indicates that these young people were aware of the school's demands to display "better" attitudes and behaviour. Instead of showing themselves willing to meet these demands or expressing regret about not meeting them, the pupils perceived these messages as irrelevant to themselves or as a hostile threat. Displaying a dissociated attitude to the posters suggests that the interviewees feel they have difficulties to living up to the posters' messages and may be an attempt at restoring their self-esteem.

8.2.4 Section summary and link to school messages
The previous section demonstrated that most young people showed agreement with the assumption that success is dependent on individual attitudes and behaviours. However, it was the high attaining pupils who subscribed to the school messages on 'desirable attitudes' most fully, describing their own positive educational outcomes as a result of their will, as well as their attitudes and behaviours. Conversely, they described the outcomes of their lower attaining peers as a consequence of their lack of will and effort, thus implicitly rendering themselves deserving of success. In some instances, these young people also rejected the idea that they could not achieve highly because of the area in which they lived. They hence drew on ideas presented in the school messages of equal innate ability and success being dependent on internal assets rather than circumstance.

Other young people seemed to recognise the demand to adopt certain attitudes but negotiate their conceptual alignment with their experiences of low attainment. They

attempted to resolve this tension either by accepting their own behavioural shortcomings or by making teachers responsible for not supporting them enough or not recognising their efforts. These young people can therefore be seen as partly adopting individual responsibility for their educational outcomes and partly rejecting it. By indicating that their personal efforts do not lead to recognition or success, they implicitly challenge the logic of certain attitudes leading to success, although not doing this at an abstract, "conceptual" level. Other young people, again, rejected ideas on individual effort outright by presenting the intention behind the messages as threatening or by stating that a requirement for sustained effort was irrelevant for them. These young people can hence be seen as rejecting messages of 'desirable attitudes' by showing disaffection from them or questioning their relevance to themselves personally.

The ambivalences among the lower-attaining pupils between adopting and rejecting responsibility, admitting hurt and displaying disaffection illustrate different strategies of dealing with the idea of not complying with the school's demands and being called upon to take individual responsibility for personal outcomes. Both the attempt of presenting themselves as misrecognised and the tendency to show disaffection can be seen as ways of grappling with the stigma of low achievement.

8.3 Constructing occupational aims as desirable

This section shows how the young people presented their personal occupational aims as desirable, in particular those who did not envisage continuing into Higher Education. It was striking that most of the young people had concrete plans – among the pupils interviewed individually there was only one who did not mention a preferred occupational destination. Two motives for the wish to pursue a certain occupational aim featured most prominently: the possibility of pursuing enjoyable activities and the prospect of earning money. Furthermore, the motive of gaining independence was mentioned. The young people tended to contrast their preferred occupations with less desirable careers, as well as with undesirable lifestyles seen as a consequence of unemployment and low paid work. Going on to post-compulsory

education and pursuing specific occupations was also presented as an attractive alternative to staying on at school and were associated with personal independence.

8.3.1 Earning money and performing enjoyable activities

A number of pupils stated that the main motivation for their post-school plans was the prospect of earning money. For some, usually lower-attaining pupils, this was related to the desire to leave school as early as possible and enter employment soon afterwards. Some lower attaining pupils presented attending a Further Education college as a way of gaining an income and thus as an attractive alternative to staying on at school:

> *I'd rather go to work, earn money than come back [to school], where I don't make nothing. (Group 1)*

> *Pupil: There's courses that pay £60 a week[13] and all that.*
> *Pupil: Aye, you just find a course.*
> *Pupil: And get paid for something you'd rather go and do. (Group 1)*

The quotes show how the pupils present the combination of the chance to be "paid" and do something that is more enjoyable than school as a motive for leaving school. Other pupils saw the prospect of "getting paid" as an advantage Further Education and apprenticeships had over university:

> *Pupil 1: I don't know. 'Cause with an apprenticeship you'd still get paid and you would still go to university. And university, you go to university (laughs)*
> *Pupil 2: Do you get paid to go to university?*
> *Pupil 3: No, you get paid for college. (Group 9)*

In one case earning "enough money" was presented as an important consideration when choosing a specific occupation: "There is no point doing a job that you don't get enough money for. Like, you want to make money, so find a good job to do it"

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[13] The pupil most likely refers to the weekly allowance paid to young people who attend a Ready to Work scheme, a national programme in Scotland which prepares young people for accessing other training, learning or employment opportunities (see http://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/our-services/services-for-individuals/national-training-programmes/get-ready-for-work.aspx).

(Group 2). This statement was made after another pupil mentioned enjoyment as the most important criterion in choosing a future occupation and can thus be seen as a counter argument.

Those pupils who presented earning soon as the main motivator for their post-school plans, tended to present money as a necessity, expressed in statements such as "Life doesn't come free, you need to work for it" or "It's all about money, isn't it, this world is all about money" (Group 1). They also saw money as essential to being able to afford certain essential goods: "You wanna make money, so you get a good house and all that" or "To get your food and all that, you need money obviously" (Group 1).

Moreover, earning money was presented as a necessity with reference to the need to support one's future family:

> *See, obviously you want a bit of money now in case you've got a girlfriend. You don't want to be building up a debt, man, if you've got a wean.[14] You need money to support the wean. You wanna get your own house and all that. (Group 1)*

This pupil seemed to anticipate having a girlfriend and a child and sees himself as responsible to provide for them. Earning money and the absence of financial difficulties (here: debt) were seen as necessary and desirable in this situation.

The quotes above suggest that earning money tended to be presented as a motive for leaving school and entering employment or destinations such as Further Education. In contrast with this, concrete occupational goals were usually presented as motivated by the prospect of pursuing enjoyable activities, a position which will be described next.

Most of the young people whose aims did not include Higher Education presented their occupational aim as a way of realising a long-term wish:

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[14] Scottish for 'child'

It [doing sports and fitness] is just something I like doing. I've always liked it and I've always kept fit and all that, so it's just something I'm good at, so I want to just try and do that when I'm older. (Kieran)

I kind of always wanted to be, like, something to do with sports or beauty and that. (Megan)

I was, I've always wanted to be an airhostess, I don't know why. 'Cause I like flying and that as well, but I'm a, I'd love to be that, that's my ideal career. (Ella)

These statements illustrate that the young people presented their favoured occupations as attractive because they involved activities which corresponded to their interests. These interests were based on practical activities with which they were familiar and which they experienced as enjoyable. The idea of turning a hobby into a career was described as attractive by a number of pupils. Fiona presented the transformation of an interest into a "career" as not only desirable for herself, but as what in her view should be a general guideline:

I would really like to have my own business and hopefully, like to make a career out of dancing and drama. (...) Hopefully everybody else does what they want to do and they can get that as well, just do your best and obviously the things that you like most, try and go for them as well, just try and make a career out of what you think is best. (Fiona)

In comparison with the pupils who aimed for university and linked their choice to preferred subjects, these young people tended to emphasise practical activities they hoped to transform into occupations. Those young people, who presented their occupational aims as a continuation of their hobbies, often presented enjoyment as the most important reason for their preferred occupation:

'Cause I don't want a job that I pure hate. (Megan)

[Beauty and hairdressing] is what I want to do, I don't enjoy anything else, so I don't want to go into a rubbish job, that I'm not gonna be happy in. (Kara)

As the statements show, these young people do not only refer to enjoyment and happiness as a criterion for presenting their personal aims as desirable, but also present it as preferable over other options, using negative language to describe these

("rubbish job", "a job that I pure hate"). Enjoyment was also presented as a motivation for a career in preference to earning potential:

> *Pupil 1: See, money is not that dead important to me, like, even if it's quite a lot of money, I wouldn't do something I wouldn't enjoy, that I didn't want to do.*
>
> *Pupil 2: I know.*
>
> *Pupil 3: 'Cause here's a job you get good money in, I wouldn't like go and do that job. I want to enjoy it. (Group 5)*

As with the pupils in the quote above, Kara stated that she saw enjoyment as a more legitimate motivation than income. She moreover drew on enjoyment to justify her career aim and defy negative public perceptions:

> *Kara: If you enjoy your job, then they, nobody can really, like, say: 'oh, that's rubbish' or whatever, 'cause that's not for them to say if you're enjoying it. (...)*
>
> *Konstanze: You think that they think that your plan wouldn't be a good one?*
>
> *Kara: Prob-, some people think hairdressing isn't very…, but at the end of the day I've got to do what I want to do, so.*
>
> *Konstanze: Right. Why do they think it's not a good choice?*
>
> *Kara: 'Cause it's rubbish, people think it's rubbish.*

The statement by Kara suggests that she draws on "enjoyment" as a value in order to legitimate her career choice, which in her view receives little social recognition ("people think it's rubbish"). This can be seen as resistance against the promotion of professional careers as legitimate destinations by the school and the tendency among high achievers to aim for high status professional careers.

Drawing on "enjoyment" was not only a way of presenting occupational aims as attractive, but also to justify the wish to enter Further Education as an attractive alternative to staying on at school:

> *Kara: I'm gonna do my own stuff, I do something that I enjoy and no stuff like in here, that's nothing to do with it.*
>
> *Konstanze: Like all the subjects you have in school.*
>
> *Kara: They're not very interesting.*

Pupil: You kind of go through school and learn all the different subjects and then you go to college and do the thing you really want to do and you learn more about that. (Group 7)

Pupil: When I go to college, I'd be doing stuff that I want to do. So it would be more, I'd be like, enjoy it more if I went to college than stay in school and do stuff that I don't like. (Group 5)

The quotes indicate that college is seen as a destination that allows pursuing subjects that are closer aligned with personal interests than those in school. Going on to college instead of staying on at school was thus a way of realising personal preferences ("stuff that I want to do", "do the thing you really want to do").

The idea that an occupation should be adapted to enjoyment and interests was also evoked when the young people spoke about reasons they had abandoned certain plans they held in the past. Kara, for example, presented her former aim of becoming a doctor as not attractive compared to her current aim, hairdressing, stating that she

(...) probably wouldn't have really enjoyed it as much as I would doing hair and stuff like that. And then when you're on call and that, I don't think, you need to get up at odd hours, and I couldn't do that.

By describing the activities involved in being a doctor as unpleasant, Kara legitimises her change of plan.

8.3.2 Being active, making a positive impact and earning money deservedly

As shown above, many of the young people mentioned the prospect of pursuing enjoyable activities as a reason for certain occupational aims and their preference for Further Education instead over remaining at school. When further describing the qualities of the activities they hoped to perform, they mentioned being active, potential for communication, and making a positive impact on others as the most desirable. This was contrasted with other alternatives such as school and occupations such as professional destinations and "office jobs".

Several pupils stated the wish to be active and mobile by pursuing a career that allowed them to communicate, do physical exercise or travel. Kara presented her plan to start working as desirable because, in contrast to staying on at school, it allowed her to be more independent and communicate with others:

> Kara: Like being able to go and work and do stuff like that and have my own life instead of having, like, having rules in school that you can't do nothin'. And in a job you can talk and stuff, like, and interact with people. (...)
>
> Konstanze: So what kind of job would that be?
>
> Kara: Hairdressing, because you, like can talk to whoever comes in and make them feel welcome and stuff, in the shop. (Group 1)

The quote shows that while school was associated with "doing nothing", working as a hairdresser was linked to the promise of interacting with people and having a positive influence on them. Similar ideas were mentioned by Sean, who presented his plans of becoming a sports teacher or doing an apprenticeship, as a chance to do good for others and himself:

> Probably, apprenticeships, like tiling and that or I would like to do something to do with sports like PE coach or do life guarding or somethin'. Like something I can do for myself and help other people as well.

Sean and other pupils stated their wish to be active by rejecting the option to work in an office, which was associated with boredom and physical passivity. "Working in an office" or "sitting in an office" were frequently-used terms by these young people when describing undesirable occupational destinations. This idea was drawn on by Kieran, for example, when presenting his motivation for being a sports teacher/coach or pursuing a trade:

> Just, it's just, you get to go to work and you're just keeping fit and you're not just sitting in an office all day, so it'd just be better than sitting about. Being active. It's just maybe the main reason. 'Cause I like it as well.
>
> Just again, you're not sitting at a desk all day, you're just moving about, driving about, and all that, you're not just stuck in the same place.

Kieran associated his occupational plans with the chance to be active and mobile, which could not be realised by "sitting at a desk" and being restricted ("stuck in the

same place"). Having a job which enables one to be active was associated with the benefit of "keeping fit" – an aim also mentioned by other pupils when speaking about their preference for a sports-related occupation.

In some instances, the idea of having an occupation which allows for activity was also associated with a wish to earn money deservedly. Sean, for example, presented tiling as an attractive occupation because, in contrast with an office job, it entails being paid for actual work:

> *It's not as if you're sitting about doing nothin' and getting paid for something that you're actually doing and not just getting paid for sitting there doing a boring job and where you just… There are people just getting paid, people can just be getting paid sitting there, doing nothin' and just be working in an office basically (…).*

Sean portrayed work that is active and has impact on others as a way of earning money deservedly, whereas office work was associated with earning money in a dishonest way. While Sean presented his plan as attractive in contrast to inactive office work, Ella contrasted her career aim of being an air hostess with the prospect of "doing nothing" due to not having work:

> *Ella: She [her mother] says it's a good career and she hopes I stick to it.*
>
> *Konstanze: Why does she think it's a good one?*
>
> *Ella: Just 'cause it's not like, you're not always in the one place and I'll be working hard instead of being a bum and doing nothin'. And it gets me out and about.*

Ella seemed to present her preferred occupation as desirable because it would allow prevent her from having an inactive lifestyle ("doing nothin'"). Ella rejected this lifestyle not for its inactivity as such, but because, for her, it was associated with living on state benefits ("being a bum"). The tendency to construct an occupation as desirable by rejecting lifestyles associated with low status could be found in several of the young people's accounts and will be presented in the following section. This section will illustrate how the young people imagined their future lives beyond their occupational aims.

8.3.3 Section summary and link to school messages

The previous section showed that pursuing occupational aims instead of longer educational routes were described as desirable by the young people drawing on the prospect of earning money as soon as possible, pursuing an enjoyable activities and becoming independent. Those pupils who mentioned enjoyment tended to identify strongly with their occupational aims and described their plans as transforming a hobby into a career. On the one hand, this tendency can be seen as corresponding with the idea that occupational aims should be suited to individual preferences and abilities. The tendency of the young people to render activities they were familiar with as desirable, on the other hand, contrasted with messages from the school to aim for destinations that exceeded their immediate "horizons". In some cases, the idea of aiming for higher level occupations was directly rejected by presenting enjoyment as a higher moral. Thus, 'enjoyment' was deployed in order to resist those aims rendered desirable by the school.

Those young people who cited the wish to have an income as soon as possible described earning as an immediate necessity, with a tendency to envisage themselves as providers for others. While these young people can be seen as adopting the demand to be an independent contributing citizen through being in employment, their tendency to prioritise work over longer educational routes clashed with the school message of investing in education to gain better employment. Moreover, the tendency of presenting themselves motivated by necessity, clashed with the demand to execute choice and realise personal potential and preferences.

When speaking about their preferred occupational aims, it was shown that the young people had a tendency to render occupations as desirable which were associated with activity, communication and mobility – often contrasting them with undesirable types of work, epitomised by the "office" job, or the prospect of having no work. This suggests a preference for the practical instead of the academic, which, to some degree, clashes with the school's message to pursue longer educational routes and adopt behaviours and attitudes which lead to academic success.

Taken together, the young people's wish for gaining *immediate* self-realisation, income and independence is in disharmony with the idea of staying on in education in order to have *more* options later; a position promoted by the school and accepted by some of the young people. While the young people can be seen as adopting the 'demand' to be independent contributors through employment, they envisaged types and levels of occupations which tended to be rendered as not "aspirational" by the school.

8.4 Imagined futures

The following section illustrates how the interviewed pupils imagined their future lives. Having presented the ways in which the young people constructed their occupational aims as desirable, this section will firstly show the relevance of work for the young people with respect to wider life aims. The subsequent section will draw together the young people's wishes for possessions and lifestyles, a theme that was prominent in their accounts. Finally, the young people's ideas on desirable places to live will be presented. Since these were usually mentioned in conjunction with the relevance of personal relationships, the latter is also discussed in this section.

8.4.1 (Good) work and avoiding undesirable destinations

Some of the young people who did not aim for Higher Education presented a "good job" as one of their foremost aims, assuming that it would prevent them from undesirable destinations, which included low-paid work, unemployment, being dependent on state benefits, being involved in gang activities or being addicted to drugs.

Working in a supermarket or in a fast-food restaurant was described as undesirable by several pupils, linking it to a life to be avoided:

> *Pupil 1: I'd never like to grow up like him [man shown working in a supermarket on photograph] and work in Tesco, man.*
> *Konstanze: Why not?*

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Pupil 1: Stale, man. (He and another pupil laugh)

Pupil 2: It's a job and you earn money, but…

Pupil 1: What can you actually do with your life when you work in Tesco? (Group 1)

The expression "what can you actually do with your life" suggests that this young person related working in Tesco to leading an unworthy life, possibly in the sense of not decent or respectable. The low social esteem linked to jobs in the service industry is made more explicit by the pupils in the other group discussion, who were described to be high attaining. Here, the young people link working in the service industry with failure:

Pupil 1: See, that's the lowest point that you could go to is ASDA or McDonalds. (…)

Pupil 2: [Other pupil]'s pal applied to go to McDonalds and got rejected.

Pupil 3: [undecipherable] work at McDonalds.

Pupil 4: 'Do you know how to pack a Happy Meal?' 'Nope'.

(laughter)

Pupil 1: That's gonna be like the worst…

Pupil 2: That's gonna be the worst rejection ever, McDonalds. (Group 9)

Implying that everybody is able to do the work at McDonald's, a rejection is presented as "the worst ever" humiliation and as a proof of not being capable of doing anything. While some of both the higher and lower achieving pupils consider employment in the service industries as undesirable, this seemed to be negotiated more personally by the lower attaining pupils.

Sean, for example, linked being unemployed and living off state benefits or minimum wage to personal "failure", imagining his life that included:

Hopefully success. Hopefully not just sitting, when I'm older, I hope that I won't be a pure failure and stuff (…). And obviously I don't want to be just sitting doing nothing and obviously being put on the giro[15] and that and getting minimum wage and stuff.

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[15] Colloquial term for 'unemployment benefits'

Sean expressed his wish for success through pointing out what he wanted to avoid: not being in work or being in low-paid employment, which he saw as an expression of "failure". The reference to the hope he will not *be* a "failure" in the future, might indicate that Sean acknowledges the possibility of him leading this lifestyle.

The perception that claiming benefits is not a respectable option can also be illustrated through the following excerpt from a group discussion with male pupils who were described as being in the "middle" group in terms of attainment:

> *Pupil 1: Don't know if I want a job when I'm older.*
> *Konstanze: Pardon?*
> *Pupil 1: Going on the brew[16].*
> *Pupil 2: You're kidding on?*
> *Pupil 3: He's kidding on, obviously.*
> *Pupil 2: You'd better be kidding.*
> *Pupil 3: Yeah, he's kidding on, kidding on.*
> *Pupil 1: I'm not.*
> *Pupil 2: You can embarrass this school. (Group 4)*

The discussion suggests that "the brew" was rejected as an honourable future destination by the young people. The efforts by Pupil 2 to make sure that Pupil 1 is joking indicate that claiming benefits is a sensitive, almost taboo topic.

By rejecting the possibility of living on benefits or low-paid work, the pupils implicitly constructed (good) work as a desirable aim. Some pupils like Kara did this more explicitly by presenting having a "good job" as a "good choice" as opposed to "bad choices":

> *Kara: You could end up being with the junkies in the street and then you could have a good job and be enjoying your life. (…)*
>
> *Konstanze: What other choices are there? Like choosing not to take drugs is one.*
>
> *Kara: Like being in gangs and all that. Like, stabbing people and carrying weapons and having to watch over your shoulder and be careful where you go. That wouldn't be…*

---

[16] Scottish slang term for 'unemployment benefits'

Konstanze: So that would be a bad choice. Other ones? Gangs, drugs. A good choice you said is…

Kara: Going to college and studying and something you enjoy doing and that. And then obviously getting a job out of it.

Kara described lifestyles associated with drugs and violent behaviour as undesirable. Against the prospect of an undesirable lifestyle, Kara presented going to college and then getting a "good job" as an attractive alternative. There were further instances in which young people suggested that educational qualifications were a way to avoid undesirable destinations. Sean, for example, talked about the potential disadvantages of leaving school:

They, the teachers, tell you like the best choice is to stay on at school and get your grades, don't leave because you might fail, and like what you want to be and can't come back to school. It will be harder to come back to school.

Aligning himself with the teachers' advice to stay on at school, Sean expressed the assumption that leaving school without acquiring certain qualifications might lead to him not achieving his desired aims ("what you want to be"). The assumption that you "can't come back" underlines the perception that leaving school early is fraught with risk. Sean further elaborated on the potential negative consequences of leaving school:

And in ten years time you are like: (…) 'I wish I had stayed in school. I wish I had done these grades' and that.

He underlined the potential future regret about leaving school by referring to other people as deterring examples:

I know a lot of people that just not even got a job, it's just giro and just sitting about doing nothing and they wish they could have went back like years ago and just done their education and that instead of skipping school. So they kind of put me off, like when I say to myself: 'oh can't be bothered to go to school today' but obviously when I look at them and it's as if I need to go and do it, 'cause obviously I don't want to end up like them.

In this quote, Sean made the link between people not getting "their education" and them being unemployed. He presented this as a reminder to attend school in order to avoid the same destiny ("end up like them").

Other young people, like Michael, spoke about the more immediate consequences of leaving school, resulting in a life with nothing to do:

> *Konstanze: So they [parents] don't want you to leave?*
> *Michael: No, they don't want me to leave.*
> *Konstanze: Why do you think?*
> *Michael: 'Cause if I leave, I would just lie in my bed the full day.*

By assuming that leaving school would mean spending the whole day in bed, Michael indirectly presented the expectation that leaving school early entailed the risk of not going on to a "positive" destination. Staying on at school, by contrast, seemed to be seen by him as an opportunity to make his occupational aims more concrete and avoid doing "nothing":

> *I just stay on for I don't know, just until I find out what I want, I really want to do and then I leave – do something instead of nothing.*

Michael, furthermore, rejected leaving school as a good move by calling his friends' plans to leave school "stupid". He thought this was particularly unwise if it was "just for the sake of leaving" and in the absence of having a job. Similar to Sean, he seemed to associate leaving school early with the risk of unemployment, leading to further undesirable outcomes.

All the young people presented in this section saw being in (good) employment as a desirable aim in the light of possible outcomes associated with "bad" employment, no employment or involvement in illicit activities. The young people tended to describe these outcomes as expressions of "failure" and indicated that they were charged with low respectability. The vigorous rejection of these destinations, as well as a tendency to speak derogatorily of people who experienced them, indicates that the young people saw these destinations as a possibility to be avoided. In some cases,

both higher and lower-attaining pupils presented educational qualifications as a way of securing (good) work, avoiding undesirable destinations and realising a good lifestyle.

8.4.2 A good lifestyle

When asked about how they imagined their future lives, nearly all the interviewed pupils mentioned that they hoped to be in a financially comfortable situation that allowed for a good standard of living, including the possibility to afford certain possessions.

Most of the young people expressed the wish to have their own house and to be able to afford a good lifestyle more generally:

> *Just having money and a nice house and a perfect lifestyle. (Ella)*
>
> *Ahm, hopefully have a good lifestyle or something, and be successful (...). (Kieran)*
>
> *Just hopefully I will have a good job and that and then a wee house. (Megan)*

Like Megan in the quote above, a number of young people expressed the wish to earn money and afford possessions alongside the hope of having a good job. They expressed the expectation that they would be satisfied with a good job that allowed a certain standard of living:

> *Just have a good wee life I think and not pure struggle with money or anything. (Megan)*
>
> *Just as long as I got a family and I've got a good job and it's alright, I'll be alright. (Robert)*
>
> *Stay at a decent job and decent earning so that I can at least live. (Sean)*

The pupils seemed to talk about the desired elements of their future lives by showing modest wishes, as indicated by the terms "good wee life", "at least live", "decent earning". The statements also suggest that the young people expressed their wishes as attractive in contrast with undesirable alternatives such as struggling with money, not having a "decent" or "good" job. This was stated more explicitly in the following quotes:

A job and somewhere to live and that's, that'd be me happy. Do you know what I mean? Just, I don't want to end up on the street (...). (Robert)

Get a nice house and stuff, just, that's all, a nice house and I don't know, just stay out of trouble obviously, just don't get into trouble or anything. (Michael)

The pupils seemed to present having a house or "somewhere to live" as a positive alternative to outcomes such as ending up "on the street", not having a house or getting "into trouble". They thus presented their future plans in terms of rejecting negative outcomes, which echoes the rejection of undesirable lifestyles shown above. This suggests that these destinations were perceived as a possibility and are supposedly informed by experiences the young people had in their immediate social environments. The wish for a good but moderate lifestyle was often expressed together with the wish to stay in the local area and maintain relationships with friends and family.

8.4.3 Living locally and maintaining relationships

A longing for security and stability could be identified in the young people's wish to remain living locally and staying close to family and friends. When asked where they imagined themselves living in ten years time, most young people said they wanted to stay in the local area, although some expressed the wish to move to another country or a "better area". The wish to remain in the local area was often linked to the wish to stay in a place they were familiar with and be close to people they knew. They sometimes expressed this by dismissing the idea of living in other places where they expected to feel strange and unsupported.

The most frequent reason the young people gave for their wish to live locally was that of being familiar with the area and the fact that they had grown up there:

Ahm, well, 'cause I've stayed here my full life, I probably would like to stay about here. (Kieran)

I just like the same place I stay in the now. (...) I'm dead used to that area and I don't know. I wouldn't like to live somewhere else. (Megan)

It's just, I always stayed in here. Like when I go on holiday, that's alright, but I just couldn't stay somewhere that's far away from where I was born, I just grew up here as well and I want to stay here. (Sean)

While Kieran and Megan only stated their preference for staying in the area they currently live in, Sean dismissed the option of living in another location. Other young people did the same by associating other areas with feeling strange and uncertain. Kieran said he did not want to move because he did not know "what other areas are like". Robert and Sean imagined that they would feel uncomfortable:

It's just I grew up here and I just, me, me and my close friend X, we were that patriotic, we just, don't know, just wouldn't like to move away, it would feel weird, do you know what I mean? Just I wouldn't, I would feel uncomfortable. (Robert)

I don't know, if I moved away somewhere, like I just, I think I would get into habits that I don't, either don't want to do or I don't like or just an environment that I don't like or I don't wanna be or somethin', like places I don't want to (undecipherable). It's just, and you end up starting, you won't be yourself like, you start being shier or something. (Sean)

Robert's expectation to feel "weird" and "uncomfortable" suggests that he linked an unfamiliar area with feelings of being a stranger. Sean described his feelings more closely and expected that moving away would change his behaviours, with a result of losing confidence in interacting with others ("being shier"). Staying locally, by contrast, entailed the possibility of maintaining agency:

(...) you can speak for yourself and do really what you want and like you know your habits and you know you can actually, you know what you can do in this environment. And it's like, you know where to go and where you can go to and like people to see, people to talk to and you know where you got to keep away and watch your back and that. So that's alright. (Sean)

For Sean, staying in the local area was associated with being close to people he knew and who know him. This, in turn, meant emotional security, freedom to act ("you know what you can do") as well as physical safety (knowing where you have to "watch your back"). This pupil thus associated staying locally with emotional and physical security, retention of identity and freedom.

Sean furthermore presented living locally and with acquainted people as attractive for the possibility of providing mutual support:

Ah, probably closer to home. I'd probably like to move in with my pal or somethin' at least to, I think it would benefit both of us if, say like no live on myself like first stay with somebody like no family but somebody like a friend or, like, at least, they do know your habits and all that, and you can help them out as well as they can help you out as well, so you're not stuck yourself. If you're stuck yourself you need to ask, when you end up on benefits you need to ask your ma and da and that, then you, then you could get loans [from your friend] and you pay them that back.

This interview passage indicates that Sean regarded living with an acquainted person as attractive because it meant familiarity with the other person's way of being ("they know your habits") and because it meant the possibility of providing mutual financial support. This suggests that for him the wish for familiarity was entangled with a longing for safety in an emotional and material sense.

In some instances, pupils mentioned the wish to move to a different locality. This was sometimes related to a wish to move to a "better" area in the city – either to evade negative circumstances in the local area or to realise a materially better life. In other cases, the young people expressed the wish to live in a foreign country in the hope of a more pleasant lifestyle. In one case, a pupil envisaged moving to another part of the country motivated by having a new experience:

Kieran: Maybe I would like a better, better area.

Konstanze: Like where would that be?

Kieran: Don't know, no here.

Konstanze: Not here, no?

Kieran: I've been here my whole life, this is where I grew up, I like it here.

Konstanze: Hmm. So you kind of like it but you could also imagine going somewhere else?

Kieran: I imagine like stuff to be better, like not so much fighting and all that, and stuff like that.

No. I'd stay in [name of the city], but no here in [the local area], unless it's a party or something. Somewhere, I don't know, just somewhere quieter. But I don't know. Too loud, don't want to struggle. (Michael)

I want better, like a better area and all that. [Local area in which the school is situated] isn't the best area, there's too much trouble. Have a big house, my own house. (Michael)

Both Michael and Kieran characterised the local area as unattractive due to violent conflicts and thus expressed the wish to move to a "better" area. However, Kieran presented himself as less certain and cited familiarity as a reason to stay locally. Although he did not explicitly connect the two, Michael seemed to associate moving away with realising a materially better life ("have a big house").

In other instances the young people expressed the idea of moving to a different country, which was seen as attractive because of a different climate, lifestyle and local people. However, the wish to move abroad was always mentioned alongside the concern that this would mean leaving the area they were familiar with, as well as people they were close to.

One pupil seemed to stick out from all the interviewees by expressing the wish to travel and move to a "remote place" in Scotland:

> *Yeah, I want to like, ideally if I was gonna be a teacher, I'd like to work like in the Highlands or something, where they've got like a shortage of staff like that. (Pauline)*

Pauline was also the only one who spoke about her plan to travel for a longer period of time or spend an interim time abroad. Asked about her motivation for moving away she talked about the wish to have a new experience:

> *Pauline: I just, I like the idea of like going somewhere new and starting again and I want to do that some time in my life.*
>
> *Konstanze: So is it the idea of being a bit more independent and living your own life?*
>
> *Pauline: Yeah, I just feel like I was really more protected as a child and I want to try it for myself without people taking care of me.*

Pauline explained her wish to move to a different location by referring to her hope of leading a different, independent life. Her longing for the new and unknown differs from the other pupils' accounts, which contain a wish for continuity and maintaining the familiar. In contrast with other pupils who related moving away to feeling insecure and uncomfortable (and not being oneself), Pauline saw a change of place as an opportunity for self-development and experience. Overall, Pauline seemed to

frame her life aims in terms of experience and mobility rather than materiality and stability.

8.4.4 Section summary and link to school messages

The evidence presented above showed that the young people tended to express their future hopes in terms of modest wishes for a good standard of life, which suggests a longing for leading a materially comfortable and secure life. They tended to express this alongside the wish for a life free from struggle. Having good work was thus seen as the central element that enabled a financially-secure, happy and respectable life. This can be seen as being in line with the future aims promoted by the school, which included qualified work leading to good standard of living. The tendency of the young people to aim for "modest" goals and declare their aspirations in negative terms, that is as an absence of undesirable lifestyles, however, is in contrast to the demand to "aim high", suggested by some messages in the school. Instead of envisaging aims, which exceed boundaries, the young people tended to imagine a life that is secure and comfortable. This can also be seen in their tendency to wish to remain in the local area which seemed to be associated with a longing for stability or a familiar environment and continuity of present social relationships.

As some comments highlighted, staying locally was also associated with physical, financial and emotional security. The young people thus rejected the idea of transgressing the geographical area in order to realise a different life. Rather, it seems that the young people combined the wish for a good or better life with the wish to remain embedded in familiar contexts.

8.5 Chapter summary

The evidence presented on the young people's negotiation of messages regarding their futures indicates that they were aware of the demand to adopt certain aims, behaviours and attitudes and the underlying "logics" but positioned themselves towards these in different ways. A small number of pupils – most of them among the highest-attaining – aligned themselves conceptually with the credentialist ideas on

the value of high attainment, Higher Education and professions and described these destinations as desirable for themselves. Associating these destinations with special achievement and seeing them as a key to higher-level employment, these young people tended to present themselves motivated by the prospect of gaining a higher standard of living, high social status and recognition. Furthermore, they presented Higher Education and the occupational opportunities arising from it as a way of realising personal talents and preferences, thus aligning themselves with the demand for self-realisation present in the school.

For many pupils, including high-attaining ones, aims such as Higher Education were associated with notions of extraordinary intelligence and grandeur. For a number of pupils, this meant that they perceived reaching these destinations as impossible, usually referring to their deficit in intelligence. A variation of this was the perception that university was currently a "step" too far and could result in failure. These young people tended to envisage reaching Higher Education via a convoluted route, such as attending a Further Education college first, a route that was described as providing "safety".

In a smaller number of young people's accounts, Higher Education or longer educational routes were not present or were rejected. Two ways of rejection could be discerned: firstly, by dissociating themselves from the lifestyle and physical appearance of high-attaining young people, which were associated with boredom and unattractiveness. Secondly, in one instance, the value of educational qualifications was questioned generally, stating that informal, rather than formal, assets would lead to success on the labour market. It can, therefore, be concluded that resistance against the aims promoted by the school took place at an identity level, as well as by conceptually countering the credentialist logic. Both ways of rejecting promoted aims were, in some instances, expressed by referring to themselves superior in lifestyle and potentially as more successful than the higher-attaining pupils, which indicates a resistance against being positioned as potentially unsuccessful.

Most young people interviewed agreed with the meritocratic logic that success depended on an individual's ability, will and effort. However, the high-attaining young people also agreed strongly with individualist and meritocratic ideas, drawing on personal experiences of educational attainment to substantiate this view and portrayed themselves as a group willing to reach success, in contrast with other young people in the school who did not possess the "right" attitudes. They, furthermore, rejected the idea of being less intelligent because of their social background and therefore adopted ideas on success being dependent on internal attributes rather than circumstance and upbringing. Some of the lower-attaining young people accepted these ideas conceptually but negotiated them with their experience of not being educationally successful. This resulted in attributing their low attainment to their "bad" behaviour or in making teachers responsible for neglecting the less "smart" group and not recognising their effort. Other young people, again, rejected the messages on attitudes outright using irony and describing the demand to adopt certain attitudes and as irrelevant to themselves.

The evidence on the young people's imagined futures showed that the relevance of (good) work was prominent in most accounts. While for the pupils who indicated a wish to go on to Higher Education occupational aims were more closely related to subjects in school. For the lower-attaining, work was seen as a way of translating enjoyable activities into occupations, often expressed through the wish to be mobile, active and communicative. This group tended to prioritise the pursuit of occupational aims over longer educational routes, showing themselves motivated by the possibilities of earning money as soon as possible, performing enjoyable activities and gaining independence. Therefore, these young people, on the one hand, implicitly aligned themselves with the idea of being contributing citizens and realising personal preferences, but, on the other hand, did not comply with the demand to pursue longer educational routes and occupations which were unfamiliar to them. By expressing the preference for activity, these young people also distanced themselves from academic activities.

The young people tended to express the wish to gain good work by rejecting undesirable destinations associated with unemployment, low-paid work, illicit and harmful lifestyles and dependency on state benefits. A good job, by contrast, was presented as a way of having a materially comfortable lifestyle absent of problems. A longing for safety was also evident in the desire expressed by many pupils to stay in the local area and remain close to family and friends. This suggests that these young people defined the demand to "aim high" as a rejection of living an insecure and unrespectable life. They seemed to pair the wish for safety with a desire of self-realisation and independence. In their accounts, 'success' was redefined as absence of "failure" and associated with leading a materially comfortable and socially respectful life.

Having presented the ways in which the young people interviewed in this study negotiated the moral obligations and knowledge inherent in the school messages, the next chapter will bring the findings from the analysis of policy, staff accounts, observations and young people's accounts together. It will highlight convergences and divergences in the ways 'aspiration' is constructed, identify ways of adopting and resisting discourse and conclude in what way power is played out.

Chapter 9: Comparing discursive constructions in policy, school and among young people

This chapter compares the construction of 'aspiration' in the different spheres that were investigated and identifies way in which it is negotiated, leading to conclusions about power at work. The first section identifies convergences and divergences between policy, staff accounts, messages conveyed to the young people and young people's accounts, and identifies different versions of the discourse on aspiration present in these spheres. The second section shows in which ways the discourse on aspiration was adopted, resisted/countered and appropriated. Following on from this, the final section concludes how power is played out in that in discourses on aspiration certain ways of action and subjectivity are rendered legitimate and others silenced or rejected.

9.1 Convergences and divergences

This section is organised along the categories which were drawn upon in the analysis (see Section 5.6). Within these categories, themes and ideas are traced from policy to the school and the young people. Besides clarifying whether certain ideas were present in the different spheres, it is shown how they are expressed and combined. Some themes and ideas only occur in one or two contexts, which in some instances is due to the way data was collected and in other instances indicates the presence, dominance or absence of certain discursive elements.

9.1.1 Understandings of 'aspiration'

When comparing how 'aspiration' was presented in policy, in the teachers' accounts and in school messages, it can be shown that there seemed to be a dominant, conspicuous version which links (high) aspiration to the will to go on to Higher Education and professional or highly-skilled occupations and, ultimately, to be upwardly socially mobile. This was underpinned by an idea that young people would realise their innate potential through being aspirational. However, it could also be

shown that the interviewed staff's ideas of what counts as "aspirational" were wider than those suggested by policy. Besides linking aspiration to Higher Education and professions, the teachers emphasised that there were other "good" goals, which were linked to skilled employment, enabling the young people to achieve a good quality of life and be contributing citizens. Furthermore, the teachers highlighted that certain aims qualified as "aspirational" because they corresponded with the individual young person's preferences and abilities. This suggests that while policy and teachers employed a similar discourse on aspiration, the teachers' version was more centred on the individual.

These teachers' understanding of 'aspiration' filtered through to how aspiration was conveyed to the pupils, promoting Higher Education and professional occupations more visibly than other destinations and equating them with success. Higher Education, in particular, was presented as a special, extraordinary achievement which deserved reward and recognition, by associating it with glamour and fame. Furthermore, the positive future consequences of being "successful" were highlighted, including gains in terms of material wealth, social recognition, and having positive personality traits. Parallel to this conspicuous discourse of success, other aims were presented as legitimate, in particular if they corresponded with the young person's talents and preferences. The emphasis on individual suitability was linked with the idea of being a good citizen who contributed to society by realising their individual abilities through an occupation. It can thus be concluded that two versions of a discourse on aspiration were conveyed to young people: a discourse on "success" and a discourse on other "good" aims.

Comparing policy, teachers' accounts and messages with the young people's accounts, several ways of negotiating ideas on aspiration could be identified. Overall, the young people seemed to recognise and mostly align themselves with the idea that Higher Education was a desirable destination, equating success. The idea that Higher Education signified recognition and specialness was present, firstly, in some young people's tendency to present Higher Education as a desirable aim because a degree would lead to being esteemed by other people. Secondly, it was manifest in some

young people's tendency to associate university with attributes that caused intimidation and by seeing it as something they felt distant from. However, diverging from the school message that every aim was possible to achieve, the young people tended to see Higher Education as requiring extraordinary intelligence.

This indicates that these young people converged with the idea promoted in the school that Higher Education is the peak of success. However, this also concurred with associating university with distance by some young people and with a step that the young people presented themselves as not personally equipped for. Pursuing Higher Education was consequently associated with a risk to fail. This risk was sought to be minimised by envisaging other routes, such as college, to university, seeing them as ways that made it safe to reach the peak – also by having the option to fall back on something instead of failing entirely. While the school messages attempted to promote Higher Education as both an extraordinary and an achievable destination, this diverged with some of the young people's associations of university with risk and distance.

While the positions presented above can be interpreted as acceptance of the idea of university as the peak of success, Higher Education was absent from other young people's accounts. In these accounts, however, the young people did speak about high attainment and other post-16 educational destinations, such as FE-college. In one case the idea of attending a college was described as undesirable by referring to the style and physical appearance of college students, which led to the assumption of "fitting in" in a college environment. A more general way of describing high academic attainment as undesirable was expressed by describing these young people as missing out on the fun and social aspects of life. These constructions counter the school's promotion of Higher and Further Education as desirable, attractive and glamorous aims.

9.1.2 Higher morals and later life aims

When comparing the higher morals underpinning policy discourse on aspiration and teachers' accounts, it was found that they converged in the idea that promoting

aspiration would enable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to fulfil their innate potential and thus be upwardly socially mobile. Hence, both drew on the idea of promoting a meritocratic form of social justice, although the teachers presented this in a less abstract way, highlighting the potential individual benefits of upward social mobility for the young people, rather than abstract ideas of social justice between social groups. However, while policy presented economic prosperity as a positive consequence of raising aspiration, this idea seemed absent in the teachers' accounts, or was only implicitly alluded to by highlighting the possibility of young people contributing through their individual talents. The idea of being a good citizen was identified in the teachers' accounts and messages to the young people and was not prevalent in policy. This suggests that there are competing ideas regarding the wider role of aspiration. While there was no explicit counter discourse against economic rationale among staff, the staff can be seen as highlighting ideas on social justice and citizenship

The discourse on success conveyed in the school was adopted by some young people, mostly those with higher attainment, when speaking about why Higher Education was desirable to them. These young people expressed the idea that achieving educational and subsequent occupational success would entail different rewards, including more immediate rewards in the form of recognition and more indirect rewards, such as material wealth and social status. The latter indicate that these young people implicitly drew on the idea of upward social mobility as a higher moral associated with pursuing aims such as Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations. Alternatively, these young people presented Higher Education as a means which enabled them to realise their interests and preferences, both through studying itself and with respect to being able to perform a desirable occupation. This suggests that these young people adopted several ideas present in the school discourse on success: the idea of achieving a "better" life and ideas of self-realisation and individual suitability.

Other young people, usually those with lower attainment, did not question the discourse on success, but their future aims and the ways of achieving these diverged

– at least in some respects – from the conspicuous definition of 'aspiration' by policy and in the school. These young people presented the idea of pursuing personal occupational plans as more desirable than remaining in compulsory education and participating in Higher Education by linking them with the possibility of performing enjoyable activities, earning money as soon as possible and gaining independence. These aims were presented as desirable because they allowed the young people to both realise desirable aims and to *avoid* undesirable work and lifestyles.

One way of presenting certain occupational aims as desirable was by linking to the possibility of performing activities perceived as suited to personal interests and abilities. The preferred jobs usually included the possibility of being active, communicating, and having a positive impact on others and tended to be juxtaposed with undesirable alternatives, including "office jobs", linked to passivity and earning money undeservedly; being unemployed and claiming benefits or performing activities perceived as not enjoyable. A second way of presenting jobs as desirable was by portraying them as a way of earning money soon, which was presented as a necessity in order to provide for oneself and a/or a prospective family. Thirdly, and often combined with the previous two aims, the young people presented independence as a gain expected from attending post-compulsory education and employment. This included financial independence, having control over one's time, pursuing chosen activities and being treated like an adult.

Besides these more immediate aims, the young people portrayed their personal occupational aims as a way to realise later life aims, which, again, were presented by expressing the gains, as well as what was to be avoided. Occupational aims were seen as a way to live a financially secure life, be happy through being able to perform enjoyable activities and gaining self-respect and social esteem. This tended to be expressed as preferable over undesirable alternatives, including unemployment, low-paid, unrespectable work or a harmful/illicit lifestyle, such as being dependent on drugs or participating in gang activities. These young people can thus be seen as deploying an alternative version of 'success', revolving around financial stability,

respectability, and personal fulfilment, which, however, includes some elements that are in line with the ideas of aspiration in the school.

This version of success convergences, in some respect, with the less dominant discourse of "good goals" promoted in the school, in that (skilled) work is seen as a central means to other aims in life. Furthermore, the tendency to present occupational aims as desirable because they allow the young people to realise individual preferences and talents converges with the idea of self-realisation promoted in the school. However, the "level" of occupational and educational aims adopted by the young people, as well as the wider life aims presented as desirable, diverged from the dominant ideas in policy and school of what counts as "aspirational".

Although these young people tended to aim for similar "goods" promoted in the school, such as income, independence, social esteem and individual fulfilment, they expressed a wish to gain these immediately. Furthermore, the young people tended to express their aims in "modest" terms, expressing a wish for respectability instead of high social status and a stable income rather than a high income. In addition to this, they imagined to realise their later life aims through different educational and occupational routes than those suggested in the school, expressing a wish to pursue shorter educational routes, pursue occupations which were linked to practical, rather than academic and which were linked to their hobbies. Overall, this version of success can be seen as contrasting with the school messages of adopting a "wider horizon" in terms of types of aims and "aim higher" in terms of educational achievements and social position.

9.1.3 Wider discourses: credentialism and meritocracy

The policy as well as the teachers' version of the aspiration discourse seemed to be underpinned by a wider meritocratic and credentialist discourse, assuming that the societal position of individuals should depend on the individual qualities of each pupil – including ability, effort and educational merits – instead of the group they are born into. This meritocratic ideal was paired with the assumption that innate ability is distributed equally among the population and is independent from social background.

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Both the policy discourse and the teachers' accounts suggests that a distribution of societal positions according to ability is currently not realised, which presented the backdrop of the need to raise aspiration.

These meritocratic ideas were conveyed in the school through messages that suggested to the young people that success depended on an individual's internal qualities rather than external circumstances, including the social background of a person. It was suggested that any aim was achievable if the young people relied on their inner assets, including will, effort, and determination. These ideas were spelled out to pupils by presenting success stories of former pupils, and famous people which personified a self-made person. Both in policy documents and in the school discourse, meritocratic ideas were combined with a credentialist discourse, assuming educational outcomes as the key mechanisms for the distribution of occupational and societal positions. This idea was also presented to the pupils by presenting post-compulsory education – and Higher Education in particular – as a key to occupational opportunities, both in the sense of access to a wider range of options and access to higher status occupations.

In the young people's accounts, the credentialist "logic" was prominent, which was evident in the tendency to see educational qualifications as a means to reach other aims in life. This assumption was mainly expressed by presenting certain educational qualifications as a necessary precondition for gaining employment. More specifically, the young people drew on the idea that higher-level qualifications led to "better" – that is higher socially-valued and financially-rewarded occupations. However, although most young people drew on this "logic" in general terms, they varied in respect to the degree in which they hoped to pursue higher-level educational qualifications.

Among those young people who indicated a wish to go on to Higher Education, higher educational qualifications tended to be seen as a means of opening up occupational opportunities, both in terms of a wider range of occupations and occupations at a higher level. This was sometimes expressed drawing on terminology

that suggested education was a key that opened up "doors". In addition to this, education was presented as a worthwhile investment that paid off later on in life. The pay-off was either imagined in terms of gaining more highly rewarded employment, or in terms of leading to individual fulfilment and happiness. These young people thus present education as largely instrumental, particularly with regard to further material and non-material aims. The view that the experience of Higher Education was attractive in itself could be identified, although it seemed to be less prominent.

The young people who did not indicate a wish to go on to Higher Education drew inconsistently on credentialist ideas. These young people tended to state a belief in the importance of educational qualifications at a conceptual level, but were more ambivalent when talking about their preparedness to stay on at school and participate in post-compulsory education. Among these pupils, post-compulsory education was spoken about in two different ways: Firstly, gaining educational qualifications in school or through Further Education and training was presented as a means to attain personally chosen and relevant occupations. Secondly, sometimes related to the former, educational qualifications were seen as a way to avoid undesirable lifestyles such as unemployment, low income and dependency on state benefits. Thus, the relevance of educational qualifications was presented in an instrumental way, similar to the higher attaining young people. However, in contrast with those attaining highly, however, education was – at least by some – presented as an insurance *against* undesirable outcomes, rather than a key to a range of options. These pupils thus associated a certain level of educational qualifications with safety, while, aiming too highly was associated with risk.

Furthermore, these young people showed themselves ambivalent regarding their own behavioural alignment with the assumption that educational qualifications were of objective value. They tended to negotiate their conceptual alignment with the desire to leave school at an early stage in order to pursue more desirable activities and earn money. For some pupils, this tension was resolved by presenting themselves as gaining *enough* qualifications in order to pursue their preferred aims. This suggests that the credentialist discourse was forceful among the young people, but created a

tension with what was considered desirable immediately and in later life (see Section 9.1.2).

While a credentialist view was prominent among young people, there was one instant in which this "logic" was challenged at a conceptual level. This was done by questioning the idea that higher levels of educational qualifications led to a greater likelihood of employment. Instead, alternative ways of getting a job were presented as more successful, including personal contacts and proving oneself. This view was stated in conjunction with rejecting the idea that the higher attaining pupils in the school would be more successful, as predicted by the teachers. These young people thus explicitly countered the credentialist discourse by challenging the idea of the instrumental value of educational qualifications and emphasising the value of other assets. They did this by rejecting the idea that high attaining pupils would gain success – which they described as an idea expressed by the teachers – and presenting themselves as potentially more successful.

As with the credentialist logic, the young people tended to align conceptually with the wider meritocratic discourse in that they presented the assumption that anybody could reach any aim if they were willing and made an effort. Nevertheless, there were differences in the way the young people talked about their personal willingness to pursue educational qualifications and to strive towards highly-valued occupational aims.

The higher attaining pupils also expressed a strong belief in meritocratic principles. They presented success in school and beyond as a depending entirely on individual will and attitudes, drawing on the success stories that they were presented with in the school and drawing on their own attainment in order to underpin this belief. Some of these young people explicitly drew upon the idea that ability was independent of social background in order to explain their motivation and determination to go to university and pursue associated occupations. These young people furthermore expressed the idea of success being dependent on the individual by linking their fellow pupils' lower attainment to their attitudes. The idea that the responsibility for

one's educational and later life achievement was in the hands of the individual thus seemed to be expressed even more strongly by these young people than it was done by policy and teachers. Indirectly they presented themselves as willing as opposed to other, less willing pupils in the school, and hence deserving of success.

The presence of meritocratic ideas can also be noticed in the accounts of other, lower achieving, young people, albeit in a more ambivalent way. While these young people tended to align conceptually with these ideas, indicating that educational and later life outcomes were due to individual attitudes and choices, this could not always be held up when speaking about their actions and educational outcomes. There were different ways of resolving this tension, which often occurred in combination in the young people's accounts. Firstly, the pupils adopted personal responsibility for their lower educational outcomes by linking them to their own shortcomings, usually referring to inappropriate behaviour. Secondly, responsibility was deferred to teachers referring to their teaching skills or to them privileging the "smart" pupils. This was in some instance linked to highlighting that their own effort was futile, as it would not be recognised by the teachers. This suggests the young people implicitly questioned the efficacy of effort, although they did not present an explicit counter "logic". A further way of negotiating ideas on individual responsibility by the lower attaining pupils was to reject meritocratic messages given by the school as irrelevant by indicating that they had given up on the idea of attaining in school.

The ambivalent stances towards the connection of inner qualities and success suggests that meritocratic principles are dominant in the young people's accounts but cause tensions when applied to personal actions. Rather than challenged at a conceptual level, the young people tended to defend their shortcomings by blaming either themselves or teachers for the absence of educational success or by showing disaffection.

9.1.4 Subject positions and moral obligations

Comparing the findings on how young people were constructed and positioned in the policy document and in teachers' accounts, several convergences could be identified.

When explaining the origins of the problem of social disadvantage and unequal educational outcomes, both teachers and policy documents were found to draw on similar explanatory devices. Both emphasised that intergenerational worklessness in and the geographical isolation of disadvantaged localities resulted in attitudes and behaviours at communities', parents' and young people's level which countered the chances of educational achievement and participation. The attitudes and behaviours highlighted included a negative attitude towards educational and occupational participation and success, a passive and fatalist future outlook and negative self-concept. The policy and teachers also used similar terminology and images, suggesting that barriers restricted young people from realising their "potential" and thus needed to be overcome. However, while policy highlighted attitudinal barriers, the teachers also saw economic barriers as directly impacting on young people's aspirations towards Higher and Further Education.

Underpinned by these ideas, both policy and teachers constructed at least some young people from disadvantaged communities as innately able, but held back – among other barriers – by a lack of appropriate attitudes and behaviours that would allow them to overcome disadvantage by being upwardly socially mobile. Both issued– at least implicitly – a demand on young people to adopt "higher aims" – associated with a call to invest in educational qualifications – and to work on their inner dispositions, in particular with the aim to improve their self-esteem, be willing to be educationally and occupationally successful, display striving attitudes and behaviours (such as motivation, persistence and effort) and be (geographically and mentally) mobile. Both policy and the teachers' views thus placed a demand on the young people to depart from the familiar and change their inner selves. They thus placed responsibility for overcoming social disadvantage on the young people.

Despite the acknowledgement of other barriers, the school seemed to concentrate on promoting the above-identified behaviours and attitudes to the young people. The wider problems of social disadvantage featured only marginally in the school messages to the young people and in the young people's accounts. The school messages, emphasising to the pupils that they were innately intelligent, implied that

the young people might assume that they were less intelligent as opposed to their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, social disadvantage was alluded to in stories of "successful" people who had reached their position, despite growing up in poverty.

A specific feature identified in the school's messages on desirable attitudes and behaviours was to emphasise innate intelligence and the need to make choices regarding the future. The way messages on aspiration are mediated to the young people indicates awareness among staff of the social position of the young people which might not provide them with other than these "internal" resources and the realisation that they may not receive these messages outside of the school environment.

The idea of being restricted by barriers was rejected explicitly by some of the higher attaining young people who indicated a wish to go on to Higher Education. When they spoke about the socio-economic disadvantage in the local area, they did so in order to highlight that this did not mean that they were less able than other young people and could not achieve the same aims. Hence, they seemed to deploy the ideas of equal innate ability and the importance of inner attributes present in the school messages and implicitly rejected the image of barriers present in the teachers' accounts and policy. The analysis furthermore showed that these young people adopted the demand to display "aspirational" attitudes and use education as a means to achieve higher occupational and social positions than those commonly held in their families and neighbourhoods. Academic effort and achievement were thus the main "technologies" adopted by these young people.

However, even though these young people expressed the idea of achieving higher educational and occupational positions and the attached rewards, they tended not to frame this in terms of escape as it was done in policy and by teachers. Although some young people dreamt of living in a "better" area, they mostly expressed a wish to stay geographically close and maintain personal relationships. Only one of the interviewed young people expressed a wish to dissociate from the familiar entirely

by moving to a different part of the country and have new experiences. This suggests that these young people converged with the school message of envisaging unfamiliar aims and, to some extent, transgressing social boundaries, but did not always converge with the idea of dissociating themselves from their geographical environment and social contacts.

Those young people who did not aim for Higher Education tended to associate sticking to the familiar with positive notions of security, support and enjoyment. Firstly, pursuing occupational aims related to familiar activities and hobbies was presented as desirable because it led to enjoyment and happiness. Secondly, staying geographically close and maintaining relationships was associated with feelings of safety and, in some instances, freedom. For these young people, being in a familiar environment, equated to being physically safe (for example through knowing the dangers) and thus free, emotionally secure (through being close to family members and friends), and financially secure (through being able to rely on financial support). Thus, the negative connotations of being attached to the familiar (as providing a barrier to the realisation of potential and to social mobility) present in policy and teachers' accounts diverged with the young people's positive connotations, associated with freedom, security, support, enjoyment/happiness.

Besides the demand to dissociate from the familiar, policy and school messages implicitly and explicitly called on young people to show agency with regard to the future, underpinned by an idea that the young people might have fatalist and passive attitudes towards their futures. The data presented in this study suggest that the young people converged with the demand to adopt concrete aims and make choices. They did so by naming concrete aims for the future and by tending to portray their aims as personally chosen and preferable. While in the school there was a tension between valuing individual choice and suggesting that some choices might be more legitimate than others, there was a tendency among young people to deploy the idea of choice to legitimise their occupational and educational aims – in particular if these did not comply with the criteria of a "good goal", as suggested by the school.

Similarly, although the lower attaining young people tended to show ambivalence towards adopting aspirational attitudes and behaviours (see Section 9.1.3) they drew on ideas of determination and effort when speaking about their personal occupational aims. The importance of choice and attributes such as effort and determination in the young people's accounts diverged with the image of young people being passive and fatalist about their futures. However, while the school encouraged the young people to show these attitudes towards educational achievement and participation, these young people tended to adopt this demand by deploying them towards their personal occupational aims, which did not always comply with the aims rendered desirable in the school messages. The importance young people give to making choices suggests that they present themselves as agents of their futures.

The idea, present in the teachers' accounts and policy, that young people might have fatalist and passive stances towards employment was rejected particularly vigorously by the young people. In their accounts, not being employed tended to be associated with notions of passiveness and not being useful. This was rejected when dissociating themselves from undesirable destinations, such as unemployment and welfare dependency, but also when talking about "office jobs". Occupations, by contrast, which allowed for being active, communicating and having an impact, were presented as desirable (see Section 9.1.1). This suggests that the young people's descriptions of their desired occupational futures diverged from the image of young people being passive. Besides adopting a general active stance towards employment, these young people also drew on ideas of "activeness" and "passiveness" in conjunction with the actual content of future occupations.

9.2 Negotiating ideas on aspiration

Chapter 4 showed how Foucault's later work increasingly brought individual agency and resistance back into his thinking. Power, exerted through discourse, is assumed to produce resistance, according to Foucault, it is by examining resistance that we can reveal how power is at work. Furthermore, individuals are assumed to develop subjectivity by applying "techniques of the self", that is by creatively appropriating

discursive positions to transform themselves into desirable states of being. It was also set out in Chapter 4 that this thesis aims to provide clarification as to the way different ways contexts influence the transformation and appropriation of discourse. This section therefore shows what forms of adopting, appropriating and resisting discourse could be identified, and how this points to the influence of other discourses and the extra-discursive. Hence, conclusions can be drawn regarding how power is played out and consequently, which ways of understanding and action are made possible and impossible.

9.2.1 Teachers: An individualised version of the aspiration discourse

It could be shown that the way teachers problematised 'aspiration' largely converged with ideas identified in policy discourse. This indicates the forcefulness of the wider discourse on 'aspiration' which identifies unequal participation rates in Higher and Further Education of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and, in conjunction with this, low social mobility as a problem that needs to be addressed in educational settings. They also used similar rhetoric to the policy discourse when characterising some of the young people as lacking in appropriate attitudes and behaviours necessary to be educationally successful, regarding these as an outcome of deeper rooted attitudes in disadvantaged communities and families. It could be shown that teachers spoke in terms of the aspiration discourse in recognising low levels of aspiration – that is an insufficient will to adopt Higher Education and professional occupations as aims, as well as the attitudinal dispositions to strive towards these aims – as a major problem that needed to be tackled. The teachers thus seemed to adopt the demand placed on schools to tackle young people's aspirations.

However, the analysis also showed that there were disparities between the wider relevance (higher morals) given to efforts of raising aspiration, whereby the teachers placed more emphasis on social justice than economic rationales and drew on the idea of creating contributing citizens, which was largely absent in policy. This suggests that between policy and teachers, rationales of improving educational outcomes in the population to increase economic prosperity compete with rationales

of creating good citizens which might be rooted in professional discourses on the purpose of education. It can also be read as drawing on rhetoric of recent curricular reform in Scotland (Curriculum for Excellence), which includes "responsible citizens" as one of the four main "capacities" to be developed in young people (Education Scotland, 2012a). Nevertheless, both policy and teachers seemed to converge in seeing upward social mobility and the realisation of a meritocratic society as an ideal to be pursued through efforts of raising aspiration.

The way teachers constructed young people converged with those identified in policy to a large extent, constructing young people as victims of circumstance and in need of being freed of different kinds of barriers which held them back from realising their potential, drawing on similar images of restriction and immobility. This indicates the dominance of construction of working class populations in public discourse. Nevertheless, it could also be shown that there was some variety between the teachers' accounts, in particular regarding the question of whether poverty constitutes a direct barrier to participation in Higher and Further Education or is mediated by attitudes and perceptions. This suggests firstly, that the assumptions underpinning school practice are not uniform and secondly, that attitudinal, cultural and economic explanations were present among the teaching staff. Furthermore, the stronger emphasis on the direct impact of poverty might indicate that the teachers' accounts were influenced by their everyday experience with the pupils.

Differences in emphasis between policy and teachers could also be identified with regard to what was considered as "aspirational". Although the teachers seemed to implicitly regard Higher Education and professional occupations as the more valuable aim, they also emphasised the importance of aims being suitable to the young person's abilities and interests. This might be influenced by the teachers' experience with a heterogeneous pupil population and a sensibility for a plurality of interests and talents. Furthermore, it suggests a tension between the dominant discourse on desirable aims and a more individual-centred version.

9.2.2 The school: Discourses of "success" and other "good goals"

The findings show that ideas on aspiration were conveyed to the young people through a visible discourse on "success", promoting Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations and a less dominant version of "success" advertising other "good goals" such as Further Education and skilled work. This reflects the tension in teachers' assumptions but also suggests that the discourse of aspiration identified in policy was largely conveyed without question to the young people. It furthermore suggests that policy imperatives such as the demand to increase the numbers of pupils going on to "positive destinations" and to Higher Education are forceful here. Thus, the possibilities of teaching staff to resist dominant ideas on what counts as legitimate aspirations for young people can be seen as limited through imperatives which emanate from policy pressures which go beyond the merely discursive.

It was shown that in addition to promoting certain desirable aims, the importance of individual attitudes and behaviours as means to realise success was highlighted in the school and conveyed in conjunction with the messages of success being dependent on the individual rather than background and circumstance. This indicates that meritocratic principles dominant in policy and teachers' accounts permeated the school messages. Furthermore, it can be argued that the emphasis on attitudes and the possibility of success can be seen as rooted in an awareness among teachers that due to their socio-economically disadvantaged position, these young people might not have other resources they can draw upon. The repeated message that the young people had to consider themselves as equally intelligent as other young people is a further example of the teachers trying to reduce a perception of "deficit" in the young people.

In summary, the school discourse seems to be strongly influenced by policy imperatives which reduce possibilities for alternative views on aspiration. The way messages are conveyed to pupils seems to depend on the individual views of teaching staff – which often converge with policy ideas – policy imperatives and awareness about the young people's disadvantaged backgrounds, which seems to result in a more individual centred approach than suggested in policy.

The findings from the young people suggest that rather than identifying complete resistance and compliance, discourse was often resisted indirectly. In addition to this, ideas were redefined and appropriated towards different purposes than intended. These processes can be seen as influenced by the specific situation they were taken up and the wider context of the pupils' lives. The following section discusses firstly, how the young people negotiated the more immediate demand of investing in education and secondly, how they constructed later life aims as desirable, adopting and resisting official discourse on valuable future aims.

9.2.3 The pupils: Alignment, conceptual converge and behavioural resistance

Among the young people, different forms of adopting, appropriating, and resisting the ideas on aspiration in the school could be identified. Drawing on the distinction by Armstrong and Murphy (2012) between "conceptual" and "behavioural" resistance, the analysis of the young people's accounts suggested that ideas on 'aspiration' were resisted more in a behavioural than a conceptual way. In particular, the research could identify tensions between agreeing with the "logics" underlying the discourse – such as the meritocratic ideal – and personally adopting suggested aims and behaviours.

The idea of Higher Education being the most desirable aim seemed to be recognised by the young people and negotiated in different ways. The young people who complied with the demand to aim for Higher Education presented themselves motivated by the rewards they associated with it on the one hand, and the idea of realising individual interests and abilities on the other hand. In particular the latter seemed to be paired with the idea that the young people recognised themselves as being innately intelligent. This suggests that for these young people the possibility to take up the position of an aspirational and academically able person seemed to be linked to their attainment in school. Adopting Higher Education as a personal aim also seemed to be linked to the question of whether young people were willing to adopt the personality of a high achiever and a willingness to adopt aspirational attitudes.

Although most pupils tended to align themselves with the idea that Higher Education and other longer educational routes were valuable and deserved esteem, this did not necessarily mean that they adopted the suggested aim for themselves. In the words of Armstrong and Murphy (2012) there could be "conceptual" agreement but "behavioural" resistance. The findings in this study, however, suggest a more nuanced picture. Some pupils presented the idea of participating in Higher Education as desirable but presented university as distant and not (immediately) reachable. The young people's difficulty of aligning themselves with the demand to "aim high" found expression in the image of having to bridge a distance and of risking failure. This suggests that for these young people, compliance and resistance was a matter of extra-discursive resources and possibilities and was influenced by a negotiation of different forms of risks and benefits.

A more explicit form of resistance against adopting "high aims" could be identified among pupils who did not explicitly mention Higher Education. This form of resistance was expressed by the pupils through distancing themselves from the educationally high-achieving young people by describing their physical appearance and lifestyle as undesirable. This suggests that they resisted the demand to "aim higher" on the basis of rejecting becoming an academically high attaining young person, which was associated with losing one's identity and adopting a sort of life they considered as undesirable. By associating the lifestyle of high attaining young people with boredom and not being sociable suggests a rejection of academic virtues and a preference for sociability and activity, which might be rooted in their everyday socio-cultural environments. The rejection of adopting certain physical appearances and styles also points to socially shaped preferences of taste.

The two outlined forms of resistance suggest that the pupils negotiated the messages on "desirable goals" by describing them as not suitable, applicable and realisable for *themselves* rather than rejecting the knowledge mediated by the school. Nevertheless, a counter discourse regarding the value of higher educational qualifications could be identified in one instance, in which a pupil suggested that personal contacts and proving one's skills were more effective with respect to finding work than

educational qualifications. This counter "logic" against credentialist ideas points to the existence of "submerged" local knowledge (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). However, the observation that such counter discourse is largely absent from the young people's talk can also be seen as a reflection of the structural changes in the local and national economy, and more specifically the loss of heavy industry and the related forms of work, which also resulted in a destabilisation of direct transitions from school into employment. The rareness of a counter discourse among the pupils suggests that credentialist ideas have acquired force.

The tendency that participation in post-compulsory education is presented as the only legitimate transition and educational attainment as the only way to later life success in policy and school messages is also salient in the ambivalent ways in which young people negotiated the demand to "aim high" with other aims and desires. While some of the young people state the wish to leave school at an early stage, they also acknowledge the potential consequence of an undesirable future, associated with unemployment and undesirable types of work. This suggests that the dominance of credentialist ideas produces not just resistance but more specifically ambivalent positions between seeing the necessity to comply and the desire to act otherwise. This tension tends to be expressed by negotiating desirable actions with a risk of adopting an undesirable social position, often presented as "failure". However, while this is expressed as a tension for some young people, other young people reject the idea of remaining in education or settle for acquiring *enough* qualifications to allow them reach their desired "states of being".

Regarding the young people's negotiation of messages on attitudes and behaviours in the school, it was also found that these were largely unchallenged conceptually. The young people who were more highly attaining seemed to align fully with the meritocratic logic and defend it even more forcefully than teachers and policy. For them, their own experience of educational attainment seemed to provide the basis of being able to adopt this "logic". For the lower attaining young people, the idea that their own non-success was due to their own lack of appropriate attitudes and behaviours was negotiated by either adopting responsibility or deferring blame to

immediate others, in particular teachers. This suggests that the meritocratic "logic" remained largely unchallenged among these young people, although there was one instance in which the pupils doubted that effort always led to success, referring to the teachers rejecting the wish of a fellow pupil to pursue a professional occupation. Other pupils, again, rejected the messages on attitudes by commenting on them with irony and questioning their relevance.

In some instances, certain attitudes and behaviours promoted in the school were adopted by the young people in conjunction with aims which were not regarded as "aspirational". Overall, there seemed to be an alternative version of "success" present in some of the young people's ways of speaking about their futures. This will be the focus of the next section.

9.2.4 The pupils: An alternative discourse of "success"

The analysis in this study has shown that while some young people aligned themselves with the dominant idea of "success" in the school, others seemed to present different immediate and later life aims as desirable. These aims were usually not presented as generally more desirable, but as preferable by the individual pupils. It is thus argued that they can be seen as an alternative version of "success" rather than a counter discourse.

It was shown that when describing the motivations for their envisaged occupational aims, those young people who did not plan to go on to Higher Education expressed a wish to perform an enjoyable activity, become independent and earn money as soon as possible. These goals tended to be presented as incompatible with staying on at school. The preferences for earning immediately and for independence can be seen as rooted in experiences of scarce financial resources, as well as the influence of working class trajectories which include starting a family early. The resistance against prolonging education can thus be seen against a background of material circumstances as well as traditional working class trajectories.

When speaking about the types of occupations they considered desirable, the young people tended to mention jobs which involved the opportunity to be active, communicating, and having a positive impact on others. This was also expressed by dissociating themselves from undesirable jobs – epitomised by the "office job" – which would lead to inactivity and boredom and, mentioned in one instance, to earning money undeservedly. This suggests an idea of what counts as real and honourable work which might be reminiscent of working class tradition.

However, the rejection of some male pupils of dirty, manual work also suggests that traditional (male) working class occupations compete with newer occupations in the sports and fitness sector, which were associated with the opportunity of staying fit and physically attractive, and doing less hard and dirty work. This might hint towards a changed form of working class male identity as well as to the situations that traditional male working class occupations are not as available as in the past. More generally, the tendency to construct activity as desirable seems to merge both traditional working class activities with the features of new occupations, which find expression in preference for occupations in the sectors of sports, personal services, and teaching. Thus, the young people's constructions of desirable work can also be seen as reaching desirable states of being through new types of work.

Employment and specific occupations were furthermore seen as the main means to achieve desirable states of being in later life. These aims tended to be presented by the young people in "modest" terms and included a "decent" income which allowed for living a good lifestyle and the ability to afford certain possessions, having an enjoyable job and in some cases a family (which was also sometimes linked to income in order to be able to provide for the family). The young people tended to express a wish to stay close to the area in which they currently lived. The young people's envisaged futures were interpreted as a wish for safety, security and happiness. This can be seen as linked to working class values but, as it became evident in the young people's accounts, was also linked to experiences of poverty.

The analysis showed that this alternative version of "success" tended to be constructed by the young people by contrasting it with undesirable alternatives, including unemployment and living on state benefits, low-paid employment, and lifestyles associated with drug dependency or involvement in gangs. These destinations tended to be associated with inactivity, danger and harm, and low respect by others. This fierce rejection of undesirable destinations suggests that the young people perceived undesirable destinations as a threat, which can be understood considering the high levels of unemployment in the local area and a local job market that offers mainly low-skilled types of work in supermarkets and fast-food chains. Against a backdrop of these undesirable destinations, the young people seemed to appropriate the notion of "success", redefining it as the absence of "failure" rather than reaching distant aims.

While this alternative version in many respects is in contrast with the dominant notion of "success", it could also be shown to overlap to some degree, with the less dominant version of "good goals". The centrality of work to pursue other life aims was one example of this. Moreover, by presenting themselves as determined to realise their aims, many young people seemed to display "aspirational" attitudes and behaviours and drew on ideas of self-realisation and choice suggested by the school as criteria for being an "aspirational" person. On the other hand, their chosen occupational aims did not always comply with what was presented as "aspirational" in the dominant policy and school discourse. These young people can thus be seen as adopting ideas on self-realisation and "aspirational" attributes while directing them towards personal aims which did not (always) converge with the aims regarded as legitimate in official discourse. Speaking with Foucault, these young people "diverted" these ideas "to their own purposes" (Foucault, 1979).

It could also be shown that there were pupils who reconciled some aspects of this alternative discourse of "success" with the more dominant version. One example was the tendency by some higher attaining young people to express a wish to pursue Higher Education and be upwardly socially mobile alongside mentioning the wish to stay in the local area. This suggests that young people fused ideas from different

contexts to construct and justify their actions and preferences. This resonates with Foucault's assumption that discourse produces counter discourse and that different discursive elements co-exist. It is suggested here, that in order to understand these combinations of elements better, it is necessary to examine the socio-cultural contexts in which they arise.

9.3 Legitimate and silenced ways of "acting" and "being"

According to Foucault, the aim of his genealogical method was to bring "subjugated" knowledge to the light (see Section 4.1.2). Accordingly, it was assumed here that by identifying convergences, divergences and forms of negotiating discourse, it was possible to identify what elements are dominant and, conversely, what is silenced in the discourse on aspiration (and its variations in the school context), and thus rendered illegitimate. As, according to Foucault, power is exerted through governing subjects (see Section 4.1.2), it is identified here how power is at play in the negotiation of aspiration by rendering certain forms of subjective experience and action legitimate or illegitimate.

It was shown that the tendency in policy and the school to promote educational qualifications as a way to occupational success and upward social mobility remained largely (conceptually) unchallenged by the young people. Its forcefulness could be identified in a tendency to describe qualifications as a key to occupational success (and thus material and non-material gains) and a tendency to associate not pursuing qualifications with the risk of leading undesirable lifestyles. However, it could also be shown that the credentialist discourse met resistance in the form of refusing to adopt behaviours leading to academic success, refusing to identify with the persona and the lifestyle of an academically successful person, and expressing the wish to attain certain aims (income, independence) immediately and without pursuing higher levels of qualifications. This suggests a submersion of other "technologies" of reaching desirable goods and forms of subjectivity which are not explicitly countered but at a "behavioural" and "identity" level. The counter discourse against the idea of qualifications leading to employment that was identified in one instance indicates a

remaining knowledge – possibly rooted in local knowledge – about alternative ways of gaining employment, but seems to be rather less "audible".

Linked to the dominant credentialist logic, was the idea that certain attitudes and behaviours were the precondition for educational, and consequently, occupational and social success. Both in policy and the school, these attributes were mainly linked to a disposition and work ethic directed towards academic success and future occupational goals. Again, these ideas seemed to be largely adhered to by the young people, although they produced behavioural resistance in the form of irony, the display of disaffection and some partial conceptual resistance doubting the efficacy of (their personal) effort and will. This, as well as the young people's efforts to present themselves as "smart", making an effort and potentially "successful", suggests that the ideas produce a deficit position in those young people who do not or cannot comply. It furthermore points to the dominance of a notion of intelligence and effort that is linked to academic attainment and thus excludes other forms of achievement. While the young people's resistance seemed partial, it was also observed that they appropriated certain attitudes and behaviours and directed them towards their personal occupational aims.

The promotion of Higher Education and professional occupations in policy and the school suggests that occupations which require fewer qualifications were presented as less valuable. The tendency among some young people to present occupations as desirable which revolved around activities, which allowed them to be active, communicate, be practical, and make an impact, pointed to an alternative definition of worthwhile and satisfying work, possibly based on traditional working class values. This suggests that the discourse on aspiration and success devalued these types of occupations and, consequently, qualities such as practical skill. This also became evident in the way some young people rejected other types of occupations ("office jobs") as undesirable and rejected the demand to adopt higher status occupations. Thus, while not (always) explicitly countering the discourse of "success", the young people constructed an alternative vision "success". Furthermore, the school messages and the teachers' assumptions, to some extent,

rendered alternative goals legitimate if they included skilled employment and matched the individual young person's abilities and preferences.

The discourse of aspiration in policy and on "success" in the school also suggested certain later life aims to be more desirable than others and placed a demand for upward mobility on the young people. A disparity was identified between images in policy, teachers' accounts and school messages of escape, mobility, ascent and most young people's tendency to express a wish for remaining in the local area, adopting aims that related to familiar activities and aiming for a "modest" lifestyle. The way the young people linked the familiar with security and stability suggests that the dominant versions of aspiration and "success" neglect the positive connotations immobility has for the young people, which, as could be shown, was also entangled with experiences of not being safe and secure. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the promotion of upward social mobility excludes the possibility of being content with present life circumstances and a modest life.

From the analysis of policy it was concluded that the focus on tackling young people's aspiration meant that social and economic inequalities and mechanisms of their reproduction remained hidden. In the teachers' accounts, a notion of the direct impact of poverty on educational outcomes could be identified; nevertheless, the meritocratic notion of creating social justice through upward social mobility was pervasive. Furthermore, in the messages to the pupils, they as individuals were called upon to rely on their inner assets to overcome their disadvantaged positions. In the young people's accounts social disadvantage and poverty were referred to explicitly by some higher attaining pupils who rejected the notion that they were restricted by barriers and implicitly by accepting the demand to 'aim high' and adopt aspirational dispositions. By other young people this was rejected. However, social hierarchies became evident in their rejection of undesirable lifestyles which were associated with low income, a lack of respectability and danger. Thus, policy, school and the young people constructed certain lifestyles as illegitimate. Inequalities and social hierarchies thus were largely unchallenged.

Chapter 10: Discussion of findings

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the three previous chapters in relation to other literature. The first section discusses the problematisation of aspiration in the policy debate, followed by the second section, which sets the staff's problematisation of aspiration and the school's ways of conveying aspiration in relation to other literature on educational practitioners' views and educational practices on aspiration. The third section discusses the young people's negotiations of the messages encountered in the school and the ways they constructed their futures with findings in other research.

10.1 The problematisation of aspiration in policy

The findings from the analysis of policy documents showed that the debate on aspiration emerged as an element in several policy fields during the time of the Labour government, which, after coming into office in the late 1990s, problematised the strong link between socio-economic positions, educational attainment and the "life outcomes" of individuals. Tackling the "transmission" and persistence of inequality and poverty became a major policy strategy and was presented as a solution to wider problems of securing the competitiveness of the nation, reducing the costs of poverty for the state and improving social justice and fairness. The wider debate on the need for tackling inequality can thus be seen as drawing conjointly on the rationales of economic prosperity and social justice. This finding resonates with other authors who have identified economic prosperity and social justice as two "narratives" (Riddell, 2010) drawn on by policy. In line with Archer, (2007) and Jones and Thomas (2005), it is argued here that the economic rationale has tended to dominate over the social justice rationale in policy discourse. In addition to this, it is argued in this thesis that in presenting improved (upward) social mobility as a "solution", the "problems" of economic prosperity and social justice are reconciled. This can be seen as a case of "discursive conflation" (Gillies, 2008).

The analysis undertaken in this thesis identified that achieving higher levels of education in the population, in particular among socio-economically disadvantaged groups, was presented as the key strategy adopted in order to increase equality and economic prosperity. This was underpinned by the assumption that there were "untapped" reserves of ability in the population, which needed to be more fully utilised and developed. The discourse thus draws on ideas of "innate ability" similar to the ideas which underpinned the aim to widen participation in higher and post-compulsory education in the 1960s (see Section 2.2). Developing "potential", according to the assumption made by recent policy, would provide the "knowledge economy" with the skilled workers it needed and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with the chance to be upwardly socially mobile, thus achieving a better life. The tendency to refer to the knowledge economy in conjunction with presenting education as a central policy area is a characteristic which several authors have identified in New Labour policy (Ball, 2008; Gunning & Raffe, 2011; Olssen et al., 2004).

This thesis has argued that the tendency to present education as a driver for social mobility and see the task of the state in creating equal opportunity, is underpinned by a meritocratic discourse which suggests that social justice is realised if the social position of an individual is determined by his or her ability, will and effort. It can thus be argued that the ideal of a meritocratic society described by Halsey (1972) in the policy discourse in the 1960s seems to re-emerge in the debate on aspiration in the late 2000s (see also Ball, 2008; Ross, 2003a). As the analysis of statements by Gordon Brown has shown in this thesis, meritocracy in the late 2000s was coupled with the idea of improving (upward) "social mobility", which was branded a new form of social justice. In line with Reay (2009), it is concluded here that this notion of "social justice" places the responsibility for educational outcomes and one's social position on the individual.

The analysis of policy documents from the late 1990s onwards showed that educational attainment and participation among young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds was a particularly prominent issue within

the wider discourse on social and educational disadvantage. It was identified that 'aspiration' was increasingly seen as a crucial factor from the early 2000s onwards, presenting it as a mediating variable between background and educational success and seeing it as a discrete, measureable attribute in individuals. It was therefore argued that by highlighting aspiration as an individual disposition, the debate on aspiration not only individualised the problems and solutions for educational and social inequalities, but psychologised these.

Analysing the documents for the meanings they attribute to the term 'aspiration', it was found that policy documents did not always define the term 'aspiration' (see also Archer et al., 2010; Brown, 2011). Further analysis showed that the term was used both to describe an inner drive and motivation for pursuing aims (ibid.) and as a synonym for young people's educational and occupational aims. When used in the former way, policy documents tended to draw on it as an overarching term to describe a number of attitudes and behaviours required for educational success, including dispositions referring to self-concept, motivation, and work-ethic. When used as a synonym for 'aims', the documents implied that having (high) aspirations typically meant aiming for Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations. Presenting these destinations and attitudes as the ideal that needed to be created for all young people suggests that policy constructs middle-class attributes, occupations and educational routes as the norm. This resonates with Raco (2009), who concluded that the aspiration debate construes "middle class values and norms" as the "yardstick". It furthermore implies that traditional working-class occupations, routes and lifestyles are excluded from the discourse and thus implicitly devalued.

The analysis of the "problem groups" constructed in the policy documents on 'aspiration' showed that low levels of aspiration were linked to specific groups, in particular young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as to their families and localities. Low levels of aspiration and associated attitudes were seen as originating from cultural features prevalent in disadvantaged communities, which again, were seen as outcomes of high levels of poverty and phenomena, such as "intergenerational" worklessness. This is in line with Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson

(2011) and Brown (2011), who concluded that the policy debate tends to portray low leveld of aspirations as rooted in the culture prevalent in working class areas and families. It furthermore resonates with studies which concluded that the debate on widening participation constructs a "deficit view" of young people (see Section 2.2 and Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Burke, 2002; Gorard et al., 2006; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Watts & Bridges, 2006) and studies which identify a tendency in New Labour's education policies of "pathologising" working class individuals and families (Bradford & Hey, 2007; Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005; Reay, 2009).

By undertaking a more detailed analysis than most previous studies, this thesis identified that the deficit of aspiration in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds was associated with a number of further negative attributes including a negative self-concept ("low confidence"), a pessimistic outlook to the future ("low expectations", "fatalistic"), and restricted mindset and behaviours, both in the geographical and mental sense ("narrow horizons"; "inward looking"; "apathetic"). These attributes were portrayed as internal barriers, which in conjunction with external barriers had to be addressed in order to enable young people to develop their full potential. It was concluded that the policy discourse portrayed young people as being held by the back circumstances in which they grow up and in need of being freed from the resulting restrictions (see also Radnor, Koshy, & Taylor, 2007). Thus, the analysis suggests that in addition to attributing a "deficit" of social, geographical and mental mobility and agility to these young people, policy constructs them as possessing innate ability and as agents of change.

Identifying the moral obligations the debate implied, it was found that the young people were called upon to change their attitudes and behaviours and thus overcome the circumstances of origin. In line with Ball's (2008) observations on Labour policy more generally, it can be argued that debates on aspiration place the responsibility of solving the problem of social disadvantage on individuals. Through the emphasis on educational attainment and participation and attributes linked to it, educational institutions are presented as the prime context for efforts to raise aspirations (see also Bradford & Hey, 2007), although the analysis in this thesis has also identified a

tendency in the interventions in the late 2000s to target young people – and their parents – via local communities.

The analysis of the "solutions" envisaged in policy documents demonstrated that policy documents set out two types of measures to tackle aspiration. Firstly, young people were incentivised to adopt aims such as Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations, being provided with information and first hand experiences of these. The aim was to enlighten young people about their benefits, improving their perceptions of these destinations and creating identification with these. This finding is similar to Brown's (2011) who asserts that widening participation strategies tend to appeal to "act on young people's emotions" by "creating 'wow!' moments during widening participation events that reveal and activate new possibilities for their future" (p. 8).

In addition to this, the envisaged initiatives to raise aspirations were found to target behaviours and attitudes of young people and their environments which are seen as necessary to realise "high" aims. The identified aspects include dispositions which were assumed to lead to a willingness to adopt certain aims, such as confidence and a positive attitude towards educational and occupational success, and dispositions and behaviours which were seen as conditions for achievement, such as motivation, self-management skills and work ethic (see also Brown, 2011). The initiatives detailed in the documents analysed in this thesis sought to address these in young people directly or via parents and communities.

By adopting an analytical approach inspired by Foucault's work, the analysis of policy documents identify what was constructed as legitimate in the debate on aspiration and what was rejected and silenced. Presenting Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations as desirable excludes the idea that young people could aspire to the types of occupations that are common in their immediate environment and maintain their present life circumstances. The demand to strive for academic success can be seen as privileging middle-class aims, lifestyles as well as educational pathways to realising success and a good life (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011;

Raco, 2009; Watts & Bridges, 2006). As Watts & Bridges (2006) have highlighted with regard to widening participation discourses, this excludes both the possibility of seeing different lifestyles as desirable and the possibility that routes other than participating in formal education can lead to desirable life outcomes. In addition to this, the analysis in this thesis identified that the demand to overcome restrictions by being socially mobile and geographically mobile, implicitly renders illegitimate lifestyle choices such as being attached to the local area and relations, holding orientations towards the present, and aiming for continuity rather than change.

By suggesting that social disadvantage is the outcome of culture and attitudes, discourses on aspiration and identifying the change of inner dispositions as "solutions", the debate on 'aspiration' can be seen as silencing structural causes rooted in the hierarchy of occupations or the unequal distribution of wealth. Furthermore, the debate seen as within the context of a shift in Western democracies towards "responsibilising" their citizens (Francis & Hey, 2009) and an instance of emphasising "self-governance" rather than top-down government (Cruikshank, 1996). While, as Raco (2009) has highlighted, the rhetoric of aspiration in welfare policy is indicative of a new relationship between the state and citizens, the debate on *young* people's aspirations can be seen as a way of prospectively preparing young people to be self-reliant citizens and take responsibility for their future social situation. While New Labour policy has been described more generally as individualising responsibility while foreseeing intervention (Ball, 2008), the debate on aspiration seems to see the role of the state to intervene *in order to* instil the will in individuals to be upwardly socially mobile.

10.2 The problematisation and enactment of aspiration in the school

The analysis of the accounts by teachers showed that 'aspiration' was problematised with respect to low transition rates into Higher Education of the pupils in their school. When asked to explain the reasons for the comparatively low levels of participation in Higher and Further Education of their pupils, the teachers were found to draw on similar explanatory devices to the policy discourse. Like policy, they

regarded socio-economic deprivation as impacting on attitudes and behaviours towards educational participation. It was found that the teachers saw socio-economic disadvantage as impacting on the will to participate in Higher Education either directly, through sparse financial resources, or indirectly through creating negative attitudes towards education and employment, a narrow scope of considered options and low confidence. The latter was firstly related to widespread worklessness in the local area, often spanning several generations, resulting in a lack of appropriate role models and thus willingness and expectation to succeed. Secondly, the staff drew on the idea that the young people were unwilling to venture out of the local area, which, in turn, restricted their opportunities and the breadth and height of their aspirations.

These findings resonate with research by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) and Raphael Reed et al. (2007) who identified similarities in the way policy and educational practitioners explained unequal educational outcomes and constructed young people and their families. Both studies conclude that education practitioners problematised the culture in disadvantaged localities and highlighted characteristics such as complacency and being "inward-looking", which resemble the way the teachers in this study described young people and families. Unlike Raphael Reed et al. (2007) and similar to Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011), who also identified "structural" explanations among education practitioners, this thesis also found that teachers regarded poverty as a direct barrier to continued education, resulting in the wish or need among young people to enter employment directly.

Unlike other studies, this thesis also examined how teachers saw the wider benefits (higher morals) of raising aspiration – and thus higher levels of participation in Higher and Further Education. It was found that, like policy, they drew on the idea of "social justice", although in a more indirect way by suggesting that it allowed pupils to be able to overcome disadvantage and poverty and achieve a better quality of life. As with policy, they saw social mobility as a way to achieve more social justice and saw education as the key driver to realise this, thus drawing on meritocratic ideas. Unlike policy, however, the staff did not draw on the higher moral of economic prosperity but made educational and thus occupational outcomes as a way of

enabling the young people to become economically as well as socially contributing members of society.

Furthermore, the analysis in this study examined in more detail how teachers defined 'aspiration' and what they associated with it. It concluded that the interviewed teachers regarded "raising aspiration" as an important element within efforts to realise better educational outcomes for their pupils. Aspiration was seen by them as complementing efforts of improving attainment. This suggests that while raising aspiration might not be the most prominent aim of the practices in their school, aspiration was recognised as a distinct and manipulatable quality in individuals, which influenced educational outcomes. The staff's accounts converged with the policy discourse in that they defined 'aspiration' as both a synonym for an educational and occupation aim and as a disposition which allowed the pursuit of these aims.

Analysing the teachers' accounts for what they regarded as "aspirational", the staff seemed to implicitly construe Higher Education and professional occupations as more desirable than other destinations, while skilled employment more generally was presented as a further "good goal". These "good goals" were further linked with the possibility to live a materially secure and personally fulfilled life. Furthermore, according to the teachers, an important criterion for being "aspirational" was having an individually chosen and suitable goal which allowed a young person to fulfil their "potential" and the disposition to work towards achieving this goal.

The way staff constructed "legitimate" aspirations indicates that they adopted a wider notion of 'aspiration' than policy, a conclusion also drawn in Brown's (2011) and Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) research with education practitioners. While these authors concluded that staff largely converged with policy discourse by presenting occupational success as desirable, this thesis highlights the prevalent tensions in the teachers' accounts. Although highly socially valued – and, thus, it can be argued, middle-class – occupations were rendered both the most desirable type of aim and the central aspiration young people should adopt, the staff also emphasised

individual choice and fulfilment as valuable. Furthermore, the teachers' criteria for a legitimate aim were linked to whether they were suitable for every pupil and thus drew on ideas of innate ability. Presenting fulfilling individual potential through education and occupation was identified as a strategy to bridge this tension. In summary, it could be said that the findings in this thesis suggest that teachers' adopted a more individual version of what counted as "aspirational".

The "solutions" identified by the teachers interviewed in this study were similar to those identified in policy. They included addressing the young people's attitudes and behaviours, including their confidence, attitude towards educational attainment, their will to take up employment and the ability to make the "right" decisions. Assuming that the young people were innately intelligent, they suggested that adopting a different set of inner dispositions would lead to the pupils being able to realise their potential, be educationally and occupationally successful and thus overcome disadvantage. Thus, they saw it as the role of the school to "step in" and balance out what was not accomplished in their everyday environments – a strategy which has also been identified by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011).

The analysis of sites and events in the school suggested that ideas on aspiration were conveyed by providing the pupils with messages on desirable aims and on desirable personal attributes required for reaching these goals. It was found that high attainment in school, Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations were promoted by presenting them in term of "success". While this resonates with Bradford and Hey's (2007) expression of "discourses of success" dominant in programmes initiated by New Labour in England, such as Beacon Schools, this thesis further examined how this discourse was constituted.

The messages on desirable aims were conveyed to the young people by linking them with both immediate and long term rewards. The former was done by rewarding attainment and by linking it – verbally and symbolically through imagery, spatial and organisational arrangements – with status, recognition/fame and specialness. The latter was realised through presenting Higher Education and highly-skilled

occupations as a means of acquiring material wealth, social status and recognition through presenting former pupils and famous people as role models. Thus, the achievement of desirable aims themselves, as well as their consequences, was rendered desirable. This indicates that the practices around desirable aims seem to fit in with the policy strategies of enticing young people to adopt Higher Education (see Section 6.4) by illustrating the benefits and linking them with positive "emotions" (Brown, 2011). In the school in this study, this seemed to take the form of "glamorising" Higher Education and professions.

In addition to "glamorising" desirable destinations, which was the most visible practice, young people were also encouraged to adopt Higher Education – and to some extent – professional occupations by presenting these as achievable. In line with policy suggestions of making Higher Education "thinkable" (see Section 6.4), these activities suggest the aim of normalising desirable aims and creating familiarity and identification with them. The provision of role models also identified in Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) study as a "key tactic" used in the schools they examined regarding the agenda of raising aspiration (p. 88). In this thesis, which focussed on the underlying messages conveyed through these strategies, it could be highlighted that tendencies of glamorising and normalising/familiarising such destinations, in particular Higher Education, suggest a possible tension between notions of specialness and normality/ordinariness.

While the idea of "success" in the form of Higher Education and professional destinations was promoted to the pupils in a highly visible way, other destinations – linked to participating in post-compulsory education and training and skilled employment – were presented as desirable as well, but featured more strongly in the individual interviews with staff and was conveyed to pupils in the form of individual advice. Furthermore, these aims were not associated with rewards and "glamour" in the same way as Higher Education and professional occupations. This resonates with the observation in this study and other studies that teachers emphasised the value of goals and thus drew on more holistic concepts of aspiration than policy (Brown, 2011). However, by examining the way these ideas were presented to the pupils, this

thesis identified this alternative version of "success" as the more silent discourse in the school.

While pursuing (highly-) skilled work and post-compulsory education were identified as the aims that were advertised most conspicuously to the pupils, there were also some instances in which other future aims were described as desirable. These included realising one's talent in sports and Arts and being a good, contributing citizen. This echoed the assumption by teachers that it is valuable to realise one's individual ability in order to be a contributing citizen. Nevertheless, these wider aims also seemed to be linked to educational participation and occupations. This, on the one hand, suggests that the realisation of one's potential through suitable educational pathways and occupations was central in the messages they were given in the school. This resonates with Brown (2011), who concluded from his study that occupational success was presented to young people as the only way to realising happiness.

The analysis of the school's ways of conveying messages on aspiration showed that in addition to promoting desirable goals, young people were encouraged to develop attitudes and inner qualities that allowed them to reach successful futures. The types of inner attributes and behaviours suggested to the pupils through messages in the school included future orientation (embracing aims for the future); academic work ethic; positive self-concept (confidence, self-belief); and motivational attributes such as persistence, resilience, and determination. These attitudes converge with those emphasised in initiatives of raising aspirations suggested in policy and can be understood as being based on the assumption that some young people are immobile, passive, unconfident and that their inner resources have to be mobilised. In addition to promoting the mentioned attributes, messages on being a good citizen by positively contributing to and impacting on society were also identified in the study school. While the school's messages to the young people echo the tendency in aspiration discourses to create "self-reliant" citizens (Brown, 2011; Francis & Hey, 2009; Raco, 2009), a further demand of being a contributing citizen was identified in the school.

The demand to work on their attitudes was conveyed to the pupils in conjunction with the meritocratic message that outcomes were dependent on individual talent, effort and attitudes, rather than external circumstances such as social origin and fate. This was achieved through discussing "successful" individuals in classroom situations, as well as through referring to the attributes of people who had reached success, including former pupils and famous people. While the former abstractly emphasised "aspirational" attitudes, the latter can be seen as making these "real"/palpable to the pupils (see also Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). When referring to the attributes of "successful" people, the message that an individual's life was a matter of "choice" was particularly emphasised. This suggests that meritocratic and individualist ideas present in policy and staff accounts was translated and conveyed to the pupils by purporting the idea of the self-made person.

Based on the analysis of what is excluded and silenced in the messages on aspiration in the school, it was concluded that either not adopting any aims or aiming for low-skilled, unskilled or no employment (and thus not being "contributing" citizens) and not being willing to participate in post-compulsory education was rendered illegitimate. This resonates with the observations by other authors who see life aims and strategies not linked to employment as silenced by dominant discourses on aspiration (Bright, 2011; Brown, 2011).

Furthermore, it was concluded that by promoting an academically hard working and striving personality, other dispositions were implicitly rendered illegitimate, such as passiveness, orientation towards the present, relying on circumstance and drawing on material, communal and social resources rather than attitudinal assets. This suggests that the young people are encouraged to rely on their inner assets, depart from what is familiar and adopt occupational and educational destinations which might seem unfamiliar and out of reach. This resonates with the moral obligations identified in policy and teachers' accounts which suggest that the young people are encouraged to change internally.

10.3 The young people's negotiations of aspiration and constructions of their futures

Chapter 8 showed that almost all of the young people interviewed agreed with the idea that it was desirable to acquire educational qualifications. They presented educational qualifications as a means to good employment and thus to realising further aims in life, thus agreeing with a credentialist logic. This is in line with Archer & Hutchings' (2000) finding that young working class participants in their study attributed high objective "value" to Higher Education. The analysis in this thesis also showed that high educational attainment and Higher Education were associated with success and presented as special achievements by the pupils, often by linking these destinations with extraordinary intelligence, which suggest that they aligned themselves with the school's presentation of Higher Education as a "glamorous" destination. By linking the young people's accounts to the messages conveyed in the school, this thesis also argued that the presence of university as a destination in the young people's accounts indicates that the young people recognised the moral obligation placed on them by the discourses on aspiration and "success".

Despite a general conceptual convergence with the value of Higher Education and professional destinations, only some, usually higher-attaining, pupils in this study presented these destinations as desirable and achievable for themselves. When detailing their motivations for aiming for Higher Education, they indicated that achieving educational and subsequent occupational success would entail different rewards, including more immediate rewards in the form of recognition gained for having a degree and more indirect rewards, such as material wealth and social status. This resonates with the findings by Burke (2006, 2007) who concluded that her male working class participants' wish to attend Higher Education was underpinned by a longing for recognition. With regard to later life rewards associated with Higher Education, Archer & Hutchings (2000) describe their working-class participants as seeing a degree "as an almost mythical ticket to social mobility and a good life" (p. 565.) Although the young people in this study did not speak explicitly about upward

social mobility, they indirectly did so by referring to the possession of objects that indicate status.

In addition to these findings, the analysis of the young people's accounts also showed that Higher Education was presented as a means of realising abilities, interests and preferences, both through studying itself and with respect to being able to perform a desirable occupation. This suggests that these young people drew on the higher morals of self-realisation and individual suitability underpinning the school messages on "good" educational and occupational aims.

Other young people presented success in the form of Higher Education but not immediately realisable. They described these aims as distant and only reachable via an intermediate, preparatory step, usually in the form of attending a Further Education college. Conversely, going directly on to university was associated with a "risk" of failure which could be buffered by reaching university via "safe" routes. This resonates with findings of other studies which found that young people from working class backgrounds tended to see university participation as fraught with different kinds of risks (Archer, Halsall, Hollingworth, & Mendrick, 2005; Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Ball et al., 2005) and employed a "discourse" of reaching university "step-by-step" (Archer et al., 2010).

It was found in this thesis that the images of distance and "risk" were related to the young people's perception of not being intelligent enough or not feeling ready in the sense of not fulfilling entry requirements or being able to cope with the form of instruction, that is personal deficits. This was interlinked with an assumption that university required extraordinary intelligence and evoked images of university as awe-inspiring and intimidating by referring to the aura of its buildings and rituals. This resonates with other authors who have reported that young people from working class backgrounds regard university, and in particular the prestigious universities, as "not for me" (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007; Ball et al., 2005; Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Reay, 1998). Referring to themselves as not "smart enough" can be

seen as an instance of self-exclusion, identified by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) as a crucial mechanism in the reproduction of educational and social inequalities.

By comparing the discursive patterns underpinning the young people's accounts with those underpinning the school messages, it could be shown that the reference of lacking intelligence by the young people suggests a disparity with the school messages which emphasised the possibility of reaching any aim given the right attitudes and tried to convince the young people of their inherent intelligence (see Section 9.2.2). On the other hand, the perception among the young people of university as distant can be seen as resonating with ideas of university being an extraordinary achievement promoted in the school. Furthermore the analysis suggested that when envisaging their futures after leaving school, young people had to negotiate discursive demands and promises with perceptions of themselves, as well as extra-discursive "realities".

Moreover, the young people's description of themselves as not "smart" enough reflects the school practices of labelling some young people as "promising" and potentially successful, implying that others have a less "bright future" ahead of them. It also exposes the tension inherent in the meritocratic message of the self-made person and the idea that talent is a relatively fixed attribute in the individual which was present in some teachers' accounts. This could be indicative of the pervasiveness of a discourse of "ability", which, as Gillborn and Youdell (2000) observe, tends to underpin educational practice despite being rejected at a rational level by teachers.

In some young people's accounts, destinations presented as "success" by the school, such as professional destinations and Higher Education, were absent. However, these young people spoke about high educational achievement, mainly by disassociating themselves from academically successful young people in the school or with regard to young people who attended Further Education by describing them as physically unattractive and associating high attainment with an undesirable, boring and unsociable lifestyle. The association of high attainment with a loss of identity resonates with findings by Archer and Yamashita (2003).

Furthermore, the thesis concurs with other studies which have concluded that for some working-class young people the idea of attending Higher Education is in tension with their classed and gendered identities. Archer et al. (2010) and Archer and Leathwood (2003), for example, describe the male participants in their study linked university to passivity, laziness and femininity, juxtaposing it with work, which was seen as enabling the adoption of a male working class identity. Corresponding with Archer et al.'s findings, the male pupils in this study showed a particularly strong rejection of the position of an academically successful person. The identified link made by some young people between academic success, boredom and leading an unsociable life hints towards a preference for sociability and enjoyment instead of individualism which could be linked to dominant working class ideas of masculinity (Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2002). Their form of resistance was thus related to their present and future identities, which as other authors have suggested, can be seen as an outcome of their position in intersecting dimensions of inequality (Archer, 2008; Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2002). As in other studies, this research indicates that certain forms of working class masculinity were difficult to reconcile with ideas of educational success. In this study, this disparity found an expression in associating "high aims" with inner alienation.

However, their wish to realise these aims as soon as possible, through routes other than education and sometimes through occupations which did not require higher levels of skills, indicates a resistance against the demand to "aim high". They thus rejected the *means* to reach certain life aims rather than the aims themselves. This resonates with Watts & Bridges' (2006) finding of a disparity between the "functionings" (desirable "beings" and "doings") of young people and Higher Education as a means to reach these.

In one instance, the rejection of high academic achievement by dissociating from high attaining young people was accompanied by challenging the credentialist "logic" dominant in the school messages. Drawing on the terminology by Armstrong and Murphy (2012), this was interpreted as an instance of "conceptual resistance" against the dominant credentialist logic of the value of educational qualifications.

The pupil's presentation of other strategies as more effective on the labour market points towards the presence of a traditional working class strategy around social networks and practical skill that is silenced by the dominant ideas on the value of credentials (Bright, 2011). This is reminiscent of the discourses employed by the young men in Willis' (1977) study who rejected the usefulness of educational qualifications by envisaging themselves in jobs on the shop floor. The pupil in this study can thus be seen as drawing on traces of historical knowledge present in the local area which used to be a location of heavy industry similar to the community Willis studied. However, it was also argued in this thesis that the alternative strategy of gaining employment presented by the pupil seems to be fragile, which also became evident in several young people's tendency to link leaving education with the risk of leading undesirable lifestyles.

The idea that success was achievable through displaying the right attitudes and behaviours was accepted by most pupils. However, the higher attaining pupils aligned more fully with the individualist and meritocratic logics underpinning the messages given in the school in that they regarded their own academic success in school as well as success more generally, as an outcome of will and effort. It was argued that the way they recognised their "moral obligations" was thus to work on their attitudes and behaviours, which can be seen as "technologies of the self". It could thus be argued that the discourse of 'success' provided these young people with "psychological capital" (Bradford & Hey, 2007) in order to envisage themselves as successful. By accepting the moral obligation to work on and rely on their inner assets they can also be seen as fulfilling the demand of self-government (Cruikshank, 1996).

Other, mainly lower achieving, young people in this study were found to draw ambivalently on meritocratic ideas. Although they tended to align themselves conceptually with the idea that success was the outcome of individual effort, they could not always sustain this when speaking about their actions and educational outcomes. It was concluded that these pupils resolved this tension by linking their low educational outcomes to their own shortcomings, usually referring to

inappropriate behaviour ("being bad") or by presenting themselves as victims of misrecognition by teachers who did not value their effort, as compared with that of the higher attaining pupils. It was argued that in questioning the misrecognition of their effort the young people partially challenged the idea that success solely depended on will and effort. This suggests that the meritocratic messages conveyed to the pupils remained largely unchallenged.

In addition to the ambiguous negotiations described, there were instances in which pupils rejected meritocratic messages on desirable attitudes, which they encountered in the school, outright. This was done by interpreting the demand to adopt "desirable attitudes" as a threat and a punishment and by describing the messages as irrelevant to themselves. This suggests that these pupils rejected the messages on attitudes not at a conceptual level, but by showing personal disaffection. This disaffected subject position could, however, be concurrent with efforts of presenting themselves as ultimately successful and "smart". The strong rejection of the label of not being "smart" suggests the dominance of an academic notion of intelligence, evident in formal educational attainment in school and qualifications, which tends to be defined by the middle-class (Radnor, Koshy, & Taylor, 2007).

Although showing themselves as unwilling or unable to fulfil school demands to display desirable attitudes, most of these young people cited these attitudes as relevant when speaking about their occupational aims. They often suggested that in order to realise their preferred occupational aims, they were willing to display determination and persistence. By naming concrete future aims, they, furthermore, reflected the future orientation suggested by the messages in the school and executed "choice". It can thus be argued that these young people appropriated messages on "desirable attitudes" by deploying them towards personal aims, which did not always converge with the "desirable" aims purported in school messages.

The analysis showed that among some young people who indicated a wish to leave compulsory education early, this was associated with the possibility to enter employment and thus earn money soon. While these findings suggest that these

young people face financial "barriers" which hold them back from participating in Higher Education (see literature discussed in Section 3.2.1), this research could show what wider relevance earning had for the young people. Like Archer et al. (2010) and Brown (2011) found with respect to their male working class participants, the motivation to earn money was presented as enabling them to afford goods and provide for a prospective family, investing in an identity position of a "bread-winner". The findings in this thesis confirm this, and could furthermore show that by imagining themselves as providing for others, the young people draw on ideas of necessity rather than those of choice and self-realisation promoted in the school, although in some cases these motives were drawn upon in combination. The resistance against prolonging education thus has to be seen against a background of material circumstances as well as traditional working class trajectories.

Next to citing an income as a motivation for leaving school and starting to work, the young people in this study mentioned the wish to pursue enjoyable activities. The motivation of having an enjoyable job for the preference of specific occupational plans was also identified by Kintrea et al. (2011). In this thesis, however, it could be shown that the young people often expressed the preference of an enjoyable job by contrasting this with undesirable destinations, such as staying on at school, doing work regarded as low in prestige and income, or living illicit and harmful lifestyles, such as being addicted to drugs or involved in gangs. This resonates with Brown (2011) and Archer (2010) who found that the young people in their study tended to place happiness and security at the centre of their desired futures.

However, in this thesis it was found that enjoyment was closely linked with self-realisation (expressed by the young people by referring to the opportunity of transforming a hobby into a career and thus realising a long harboured wish), which indicates that these young people draw on ideas issued by the school. The tendency to present 'enjoyment' in conjunction with specific, personally chosen occupations might also suggest that the idea of a transition from school into unspecific, manual labour as observed by Willis (1977) in the 1970s has lost dominance.

Moreover, it was found, that 'enjoyment' was not only drawn upon to dissociate from undesirable lifestyles which were regarded socially inferior but could also be evoked in order to reject the demand to "aim higher", which was seen as motivated by the aim of maximising income. This suggests that "enjoyment" was deployed in order to reject the ascribed position of having low levels of aspiration and the associated devaluation of occupations not considered "aspirational". 'Enjoyment' was, therefore, drawn on both when appropriating ideas on self-realisation (directing them towards personal aims) and when rejecting demands to "aim high".

The young people in this study furthermore expressed a wish to leave school at an early stage in order to gain independence. Independence was linked to financial sense (through earning a salary or getting the EMA), to having control over one's time, to learning and being treated in a more adult way and to exercising personally chosen activities. Archer et al. (2010) come to the conclusion that the young working-class men in their study saw Further Education and employment as a way to being "more adult" (p. 62), primarily because it allowed adopting the position of the male provider. In this thesis, it was found that "independence" had further connotations and was drawn on by both female and male and both higher and lower attaining pupils. Pupils who indicated a wish to stay on at school however, suggested they were willing to defer this wish, given the greater gains associated with investing in education. In line with Archer et al. (2010) it is argued that the wish for independence seems to have its roots in working class identities. However, it is also shown that it can be reconciled with adopting Higher Education as a personal aim.

With regard to the way the young people constructed their work-related aims, it was found that nearly all young people mentioned concrete occupations. While Archer et al. (2010) detected a discourse of "wait and see" among their participants, the young people in this study seemed to be oriented towards concrete aims. This could be read as a response to the school's demand to adopt specific occupational aims early on, and/or an instance of the "performative" character of 'aspiration' highlighted by St Clair and Benjamin (2011) (see Section 3.3.3). It was found that the young people mainly described occupations as desirable which involved concrete instead of

abstract work, which resonates with other studies which found that a majority of young people from working class backgrounds expressed a preference for skilled trades and jobs in personal services (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Kintrea et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 2010) that is "specific" and "vocational" jobs (Sinclair et al., 2010, p. 14). The higher attaining pupils seemed to describe professional jobs as desirable which resonates with Sinclair et al. (2010) and Kintrea et al. (2011). Furthermore, it can be concluded that young people did not seem to lack aspiration in the sense that they had no aims or were not willing to work (Archer et al., 2010; Kintrea et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 2010).

In this study, it could be shown that in particular the lower attaining pupils linked desirable occupations with activities that allowed for communicating, being active and mobile, doing "hands-on" work and impacting on other people in a positive way and staying "fit". Furthermore, most pupils mentioned these aims in conjunction with rejecting "office jobs", which were associated with boredom, inactivity, and a lack of usefulness – characteristics which the young people also associated with being in school. In some instances, "office jobs" and the resulting passiveness were also associated with not earning one's living deservedly, which points towards ideas of gaining (self-) respect through "real" work and resonates with Archer et al.'s finding (2010) that the young people had "respectable" aspirations (p. 81). While this can be interpreted as an indirect rejection of the demand to aim for occupations of higher social status, it needs to be acknowledged that the rejection of "office work" was also present among pupils who expressed a wish to go on to Higher Education. This suggests that the negative view of "office work" is likely to be rooted in working class ideas of what counts as a worthwhile and respectable occupation. Aiming high could thus be combined with a rejection of "office jobs".

This study found that the young people linked the described desirable types of work with the possibility of achieving other, later life aims. They tended to do this by expressing this as desirable *in contrast* with undesirable destinations, including low paid employment, work in supermarkets or fast food restaurants, unemployment, living on state benefits and being involved in gang activities or taking drugs, which

were described as leading to inactivity, dishonour, financial struggle and unhappiness. The rejection of service sector jobs resonates with the findings by Archer et al. (2010) whose participants described work at a fast-food chain the "epitome of a 'bad' job" (p. 91) and with other studies who have found a strong rejection of young working class men against these types of jobs (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). In this thesis, it was found that avoiding these undesirable future destinations was described as 'success' by the young people, which constituted and appropriation of the school's notion of 'success' by equating it with avoiding social "failure".

By pursuing desirable work the young people imaged they were able to have a good lifestyle, including the ability to afford certain possessions and live a financially comfortable life (see also Brown, 2011). Those young people who did not aim for Higher Education or professional occupations tended to present these wishes by using terms that indicated a wish for modest possessions and an absence of financial difficulties. This resonates with several other studies which examined the future orientations of working class youths and argued that rather than characterised by having low aspirations, young people express the wish for a "good life" like other groups (Finlay, Sheridan, McKay, & Nudzor, 2009; Sinclair et al., 2010; The Prince's Trust, 2011). It was argued here that this indicates a convergence with the school's message on the importance of work for having a good quality of life, although it did not always mean complying with the demand to "aim high".

By comparing the way young people and their families were positioned in policy and teachers' accounts it could be shown that the young people were described as restricted in a geographical and mental way and thus in need to be activated and mobilised. This contrasted with the young people's notions of sticking to the familiar − in the sense of activities, environment and people − as providing enjoyment and security. The findings resonate with Archer et al.'s (2010) identification of a discourse of "staying safe" and "being happy", which their participants constructed in contrast with "dangerous lifestyles". Similar to Archer et al., the young people's accounts in this study can be seen as underpinned by the notion of "risk" and a desire

for financial, physical and emotional security. The wish to stay geographically close was mentioned by both higher and lower attaining pupils, which indicated that social mobility did not necessarily entail geographical 'escape' as suggested in policy and teachers' accounts.

Having discussed the findings from this study, the next, final, chapter will present the conclusions.

Chapter 11: Conclusions

This concluding chapter provides a summary of the findings and their interpretations as well as a discussion of the limitations and the implications of the study for policy, research and practice. The first section, which summarises the findings, is followed by a section which outlines several limitations to the study. Following on from the limitations, the third section provides a reflection of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted in this study. The fourth section highlights the contributions to knowledge provided by the research. Firstly, the contribution of the substantive findings to the field of inequalities in education is discussed, followed by contributions to further conceptualising discourse "in situ" and to developing the application of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis. The fifth and final section discusses implications for research, policy and practice arising from the study.

11.1 Summary of findings

This thesis had the aim of examining how ideas from the recent policy debate on young people's aspirations were negotiated in a school setting. The study started from the assumption that there had been no research so far which systematically analysed this debate for its discursive features and compared it with educational practice and young people's thinking. Informed by Foucault's concepts of discourse, power and subjectivity, the thesis asked how the problematisation of aspiration in the policy debate produces certain legitimate forms or understanding and experience, creating moral obligations, and how these are appropriated, negotiated and resisted in a school setting. The research aimed to make a contribution to the field of educational inequalities, as well as to further developing the understanding of how discourse is enacted and negotiated "in situ" (McKee, 2009).

The research design comprised an analysis of policy documents and an in-depth study in a secondary school in an urban area of disadvantage in Scotland. By collecting a range of qualitative data in the school setting, the research aimed to

capture the multiple ways in which 'aspiration' was understood by the teaching staff in the school, how ideas on 'aspiration' were conveyed to the pupils and how the pupils negotiated these when constructing their immediate and later life futures. The data from the different sources were analysed by drawing on frameworks of Foucaultian Discourse Analysis, with the aim of identifying how knowledge and moral obligations were constructed and negotiated. The findings from each sphere were compared and examined for convergences and divergences, leading to conclusions on how power is played out.

The analysis of policy documents showed that the debate on aspiration in policy emerged within wider debates during the time of the Labour government in the early 2000s which presented the persistent socio-economic disadvantage as threatening national economic prosperity, as well as constituting a problem of social justice. The "solution" was seen in improving educational attainment and participation among socio-economically disadvantaged groups in order to make "potential" available economically and improve "fairness" by enabling people to be upwardly socially mobile. The analysis found that in policy documents from the early 2000s onwards, 'aspiration' was increasingly regarded as a (measurable) factor mediating between an individual's social background and educational outcomes and consequently seen as a lever for interventions.

Young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in particular were ascribed low levels of aspiration – encompassing a number of attitudinal dispositions – which was seen as a consequence of the cultural characteristics of their families and communities. These documents identified these dispositions as barriers preventing young people from realising their innate abilities and consequently identified the need of raising aspiration, realised through making Higher Education and professional occupations attractive, changing the self-perception of young people and instilling attitudes and behaviours that enable young people to adopt and pursue these aims. It was concluded that young people were positioned both as victims of disadvantage and as agents of change and were faced with the moral obligation to be upwardly socially mobile by changing internally and departing from the

(geographically and socially) familiar. Furthermore, schools were called upon to instil the will and the underlying attitudes required for educational and social success in young people.

In the school where the research was conducted it was found that the problematisation by teachers resembled that identified in the policy context. The staff tended to describe young people as restricted by attitudinal barriers to achieving educational success drawing on structural-cultural explanations, such as intergenerational worklessness in families and geographical immobility, alongside identifying financial barriers as holding young people back from participating in Higher and Further Education. As with policy discourse, they drew on meritocratic and credentialist ideas and identified improving young people's attitudes, behaviour and self-perception as one "solution" to improving educational attainment and participation in post-compulsory education. While converging with policy in their aim to foster upward social mobility, the staff saw educational attainment as relevant mainly with respect to the benefits for the individual young person, thus (implicitly) presenting social justice rather than economic prosperity as a higher moral. Furthermore, the staff's notion of what constituted a legitimate aim seemed to be broader and more individually centred. Although the staff tended to present Higher Education as the most valuable destination, they emphasised the value of individually chosen and suitable occupational and educational goals.

The thesis found that, in the school, ideas on aspiration were conveyed by providing the pupils with knowledge on desirable goals as well desirable behaviours and attitudes required for reaching these goals. A discourse of "success" was identified, which promoted Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations by linking them with fame and extraordinary achievement, as well as immediate and long term rewards, such as recognition, material wealth, and status. Parallel to this discourse, another, less visible discourse was identified, which presented other educational and occupational destinations as "good goals". Overall, the messages in the school suggested that young people should tap their educational potential as far as they

could in order to maximise their occupational opportunities and be able to be economically active and contributing citizens.

In addition to promoting certain goals, young people were encouraged to develop attitudes and inner qualities that allowed them to reach successful futures. The types of inner attributes and behaviours suggested to the pupils through messages in the school included future orientation, academic effort, persistence, resilience, determination and self belief. The ideas on desirable destinations and attitudes were conveyed to the pupils through illustrating – often with the help of examples of "successful people" – that success was possible through effort, good behaviour and willpower. Underpinned by a meritocratic logic, success was presented as a matter of individual choice, rather than circumstance or fate. It was concluded that this ways of promoting aspiration called on young people to adopt "high aims", as well as work on and rely on their inner assets in order to achieve educational and later life success.

The analysis of the young people's accounts found that while Higher Education and highly-skilled occupations were generally seen as valuable by them, they did not always consider these destinations as achievable and desirable. The association of Higher Education as a key to better occupational opportunities and later life rewards made it an attractive destination for some young people. For others, this idea of going on to Higher Education (immediately) conflicted with the perception of their intelligence, their formal qualifications or preparedness. Besides this, some young people rejected educational achievement more generally, by dissociating themselves from the lifestyle and persona of academically successful young people.

The idea that success was achievable through displaying the right attitudes and behaviours was accepted conceptually by most pupils. However, the pupils who achieved more highly aligned themselves more fully with the individualist and meritocratic discourse, presenting achievement as based on will and effort. The lower attaining pupils were more ambivalent towards these ideas; while admitting their shortcomings, they also deferred the blame to teachers who they presented as not

recognising their effort. A further position identified among lower attaining pupils was to present themselves as not affected by the school messages on attitudes.

When constructing their imagined futures, some young people depicted their imagined future selves as academically and occupationally successful individuals, presenting themselves as motivated by gains in recognition, material wealth, but also satisfaction and self-realisation through having a suitable and chosen occupation. Those young people who did not personally adopt "high aims", tended to present work or a specific occupation as a central aim. They indicated that this would allow them to realise more immediate aims, such as enjoyment and earning money and independence, as well as later life aims, such as a financially comfortable and happy life. These young people tended to present their aims as desirable in contrast with remaining in school and possible later life "failure", associated with unemployment and harmful lifestyles.

Comparing policy, teachers' accounts, school messages and young people's accounts, it was concluded that credentialist ideas on the value of educational qualifications met conceptual alignment, although, at the young people's level, pursuing higher-level educational destinations was negotiated with competing aims, identifications and non-discursive "realities". There was an indication of alternative knowledge on ways to occupational success, but this seemed to be overpowered by linking non-educational participation with risk. It was concluded that the two school discourses of "success" and other "good goals" did not counter the ideas in policy but presented a more individualised and broad notion of 'aspiration'. Among the pupils, an alternative version of "success" seemed to be drawn on, which revolved around (financial and emotional) stability and security and respectability, thus diverging from the demand to social ascent and (geographical and mental) departure and appropriating the notion of 'success'. However, it could also be shown that the demand to "aim high" could be combined with these elements.

11.2 Limitations of the study

Several limitations have to be taken into account when evaluating the claims made in this study. Most of these limitations arise from the constraints of a PhD project. Given limited resources in terms of time and researcher capacity, the study was carried out in a single research setting. Moreover, the time spent in the field, the number of participants interviewed and instances observed were limited. This requires the acknowledgement of certain limitations in relation to the generalisability and transferability of the findings.

First of all, a question arises with regard to the extent to which the findings are transferrable to other geographical and institutional contexts. By limiting the study to one school, the findings were inevitably influenced by the particular institutional circumstances as well as the socio-economic, cultural, and historical specificities of the local area in which the school was situated. Given that the school had a particular approach to raising aspiration, which it adopted when taking part in a nation-wide programme of school reform, the enactment and translation of the aspiration agenda can be seen as having idiosyncratic features. At the same time, the programme itself indicates that the aims adopted in the school are part of a wider policy agenda which arguably shapes the practice in schools across Scotland.

Consequently, it can also be assumed that the general features do resonate with practice in other schools in similar socio-economic contexts. It is also assumed that similar findings could be made in other schools, in particular in Scotland, due to the comparable regulations schools are exposed to. One example of such common features is the pressure on schools in disadvantaged areas to ensure that all pupils go on to "positive destinations" and to raise the share of pupils going on to Higher Education. This pressure is exerted through devices such as league tables ranking schools according the destinations of school leavers.

A further limitation to the study was the limited time available for conducting research in the field. A full immersion over a lengthy period of time, as it is

advocated by some ethnographers, could thus not be realised. This entailed that the analysis had to be based on data gathered by selecting a cross-section of events in the school and a cross-section of staff and pupils. Consequently, the study cannot claim to have examined all possible nuances the discourse on aspiration might adopt in the school. However, by carefully sampling events and participants in order to secure a wide range of activities and views, the study can present an evidence-based picture of the school discourse. The limited amount of time spent in the school also means that the study has to be seen as taking a snapshot at a particular point in time. Seeing discourse as undergoing constant change, it can be assumed that the form the discourse takes would be different at a later point in time.

Being limited to one school setting also meant that the research had a limited focus on the discursive expressions that could be found within the school. This also means that the discourses young people were immersed in their lives outside school could not be investigated further. It is assumed that examining everyday discourse in families and other community settings could have enriched the understanding of how young people negotiated the school discourse. It can furthermore be assumed that examining views in the school setting influenced the findings generated. Assuming that discourses vary according to the context in which they are expressed, different ways of speaking about aspiration might have been identified. Moreover, my presence as a researcher has supposedly influenced what was said in the school. I tried to make this transparent by including many direct quotes and lay open my methodological and theoretical approach.

A further limitation of this study is due to the difficulties in understanding and accurately reproducing what was said in the school. Due to the fact that the author is not a native speaker of English and was new to the specific local accent, it has to be assumed that not everything that was said in the school was fully understood. Furthermore, there might have been some limitations regarding the interpretation of certain expressions used. The difficulty in fully understanding the pupils obstructed the conduct of one group discussion in particular. In this discussion, I could not follow all the points made my pupils. In some instances there were difficulties with

transcribing group discussions fully. This was addressed by consulting with native speakers. However, in one group the exact wording of the discussion could not be fully reconstructed.

11.3 Reflection on the theoretical and methodological approach

Understanding and examining the "problem" of aspiration from a discourse analysis perspective brought with it specific possibilities and challenges. Firstly, the focus on discursive construction allowed examining the ways in which 'aspiration' was laden with specific meanings in policy, the school and among (different) young people. Examining the "logics" underpinning the policy discourse allowed it to be viewed not as an expression of common sense ideas, but as a value-laden construct. In particular by comparing the policy and school version of the aspiration discourse with the accounts by young people, it could be identified which ways of constructing future aims and routes to realising these were rendered legitimate and which were silenced. By attending to silences and rejections, "submerged" knowledge and thus ways of exerting power were uncovered. Secondly, conceptualising discourses of aspiration as being negotiated in local contexts, allowed me to show how dominant discourse was accepted, negotiated, and deployed for personal purposes and that different, sometimes competing ideas were drawn upon to make sense.

Thirdly, concentrating on the discursive construction and negotiation of 'aspiration' entailed a shift of focus from the individual as the source of meaning making to discourses providing resources to make meaning. This equipped me with an approach to analyse convergences and divergences between ideas in policy discourse, staff/school discourse and young people's constructions. However, over the course of the analysis, it was necessary to examine how individuals make use of discourse. Thus, Foucault's later concepts of Genealogy and Ethics, developed in order to theorise human agency (see Chapter 4), were seen as useful. These concepts allowed looking at how the young people used, transformed and resisted discourse when constructing their future selves and actions. By identifying both convergences and divergences at the level of ideas and forms of appropriation and resistance, the

ways in which power is exerted but also resisted by human beings could be illuminated.

Three major challenges resulting from the use of Foucault's notion of discourse were identified over the course of the study. A first challenge regarded the question of what could be regarded as *a* discourse. As in Foucault's understanding, discourse is a large historical constellation of thought, structure by certain "rules of formation" (see Section 4.1.1), it was difficult to establish whether the policy debate on aspiration or its version in the school context could be considered as a discourse or if some other concept, such as "interpretive repertoire", which has been suggested by other authors as a way of identifying discourses rooted in everyday contexts (see Section 4.2.3), would be more useful. Eventually, it was decided to use the term discourse if a coherent unit of meaning making was identified that seemed to be constructed of limited, consistent range of ideas, images and underlying "logics". It is argued that this was the case with the policy debate on aspiration, the school's discourse of "success" and the young people's alternative version of "success".

A second challenge arose from the question of whether "discourse" was to be seen as originating in policy or whether it could be seen as being produced in the school context and by individual actors (see also Section 4.2.2). Resulting from this, the division into policy, staff/school, and young people run the risk of suggesting that discourse in policy impacts on the other spheres top-down. Nevertheless, it was regarded as useful in the study to distinguish between the different spheres in order to identify and compare the ways in which 'aspiration' was negotiated. Furthermore, the findings suggest that ideas in the policy sphere could be traced in the school practices and the young people's accounts, although only tentative assumptions can be made regarding the direction of influence.

Thirdly, Foucault's concept of discourse did not seem to provide the tools to examine how context and non-discursive phenomena impact in the ways in which discourse is taken up and negotiated (see Section 4.2.3). In particular when analysing the young people's accounts, it was found that their negotiation of school discourse could not

be understood without taking their experiences of poverty and disadvantage and their social positions into account. Therefore, it was seen as necessary to consider how extra-discursive phenomena influence this process, although these could not be examined in detail. While from a strict constructivist perspective, inequality would be understood as a solely discursive construction, this study comes to the conclusion that there are non-discursive manifestations of inequality which find an expression in, and are reproduced through, discourse.

Working with Foucault's concepts also proved challenging methodologically. This resulted firstly from the relatively undeveloped theory of discourse in everyday contexts and secondly, because of Foucault's broad definition of discourse, comprising language as well as material expressions. It was therefore difficult to decide what part of the talk and interaction in the school setting should be considered discourse. Although several authors have recently developed frameworks for undertaking Foucaultian Discourse Analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Rose, 2007; Willig, 2008), there are still few examples of how these can be applied. This also concerns applying Foucaultian Discourse Analysis to a range of qualitative data. So far, authors have concentrated either on analysing documents, or individual accounts. Analysing practices captured in observations or visual data is still a new area, as well as comparing findings across different forms of data. This thesis hopes to have made a first step towards applying Foucaultian Discourse Analysis to a broader range of data and research questions.

11.4 Contribution to knowledge

The starting point for this project was the observation of the "emergence" of the debate on aspiration, which sparked the question of what this debate meant for schools and young people. Previous research had compared young people's perceptions of post-compulsory education or practitioners' views with the policy discourse, but there had been no study to date which systematically analysed discourse at all three levels. Moreover, limited research which approached educational practice and individual views from a Foucaultian perspective could be

identified. While interpreting young people's views by seeing them as outcomes of their position in structures of inequality, other research tends to neglect the influence of public discourse on young people's constructions of their post-school futures. This thesis therefore aimed to illuminate processes through which young people position themselves towards discourse they encounter in the school context and negotiate it with possible competing discourses when constructing their future actions and selves. This project thus contributes to the field of research on social class inequalities in education and to the emerging field of analysing discourse in context.

11.4.1 Contribution to research on inequalities in education

The study showed that "official" discourses on aspiration produce specific 'moral obligations' on schools and young people, which, in turn, are negotiated with other, sometimes conflicting, demands. While other research highlights the "deficit" image which policy discourse constructs of young people, this research highlighted that young people are constructed as both victims of circumstances and as agents who are expected to overcome socio-economic disadvantage.

Analysing the discourse and its underlying "logics", this thesis could show how conflicting discourses can be present within an educational setting, as was the case with a discourse on "success" and a discourse of other "good goals". It could be shown that these two discourses are a result of an amalgam of policy imperatives to raise aspirations and individual views by staff, which indicated a broader view on what were desirable destinations for the young people and a perception that not every pupil could and needed to aspire to Higher Education and associated occupations.

With respect to the young people, this research affirmed the findings of other studies in that it found that the demand to "aim high", present in policy discourse, tended to be in contrast with some young people's educational and occupational aims, as well as with what they regarded as desirable for their later lives and how they wanted to realise their aims. However, this study can present a more nuanced picture, which suggests that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not merely resist dominant ideas. Firstly, it showed that there were young people who could adopt

ideas of realising their inner ability and investing in education and saw themselves as active in achieving a more advantaged social position. Secondly, it was shown that the young people who did not envisage themselves pursuing Higher Education in some instances deployed dominant ideas for their own purposes, in that they showed themselves aspirational in relation to their personal occupational aims. Thirdly, the analysis highlighted that the young people did often adopt the idea that acquiring higher educational routes was valuable, but negotiated this with other desires and restrictions. This indicates that young people might converge conceptually, but not behaviourally with the demand to "aim higher".

Examining more closely how young people negotiated competing demands, this study could give further insights into how different contextual characteristics impacted on their willingness and possibilities to adopt the moral obligations placed on them by official discourse. While previous studies have often highlighted how identity positions shaped by young people's positions in structures of ethnicity, social class and gender clashed with the idea of educational success, this study showed that the social position of young people caused tensions with official demands in numerous ways. It showed that describing Higher Education and associated occupations as not desirable and/or not achievable was associated with a dis-identification with being a high-achieving person, with a wish to reach (personal and financial) independence immediately, and with a rejection of academic activities. These tensions, again, can be seen as linked to traditional working class trajectories, occupations and values, as well as to experiences of poverty and economic realities.

By comparing the underlying discursive patterns in policy, teachers' accounts, school messages and young people's accounts, rather than concentrating on one sphere, this study also shed light on power by identifying submerged discourse. This could be shown in particular with respect to ideas on the value of educational attainment and qualifications, which could be seen as forceful in all the three spheres. Their impact was highlighted by identifying a counter discourse challenging the worth of qualifications on the labour market, which showed that traditional working-class knowledge was still present, but no longer legitimate. Furthermore, the young

people's awareness that a rejection of investing in education provided a risk pointed to the dominance of this discourse. The study thus showed how dominant ideas exerted pressure on young people.

This study thus highlighted the manifold ways in which discourses on aspiration are deployed by young people and ways in which they converge and are in tension with other discursive and non-discursive demands. These can therefore produce agency to overcome disadvantage as well as reinforcing perceptions of individual deficit by privileging academic achievement and occupational destinations of high social status. The resulting normative dilemma is discussed in Section 11.5.

11.4.2 Conceptual and methodological contributions

This study makes a contribution to the understanding of how discourse is transformed and negotiated in a local context and by individuals. Examining how messages on aspiration are conveyed to the pupils in school, it showed that this process can be understood as an amalgam of policy imperatives, the personal views of staff and perceptions of the pupils and their possibilities. While the problematisation of 'aspiration' by staff diverged in some aspects from that of policy, it still bore many similarities, which could suggest, firstly, that policy imperatives have a strong impact on the school and, secondly, that teachers adopt a similar position to that of policy makers.

In relation to the characteristics of teachers' interviews, some similarities with policy could be identified. The accounts were also characterised by a problem-solution structure. It was therefore considered appropriate to adopt similar analytic dimensions as for the policy documents, identifying problem-solution constructions, constructions of subject positions, higher morals and the discourses drawn upon. In contrast with the policy texts, the accounts of the teaching staff were found to use more personal and informal language and draw on experience next to "expert" information. They can thus be seen as a hybrid between "inter-discourse" and "everyday discourse" (Waldschmidt et al., 2007).

The analysis and conceptualisation of discursive features inherent in school sites and events can be regarded as even more complex. This is partly due to their "nature" of incorporating both language and non-language-based elements. In this thesis, I decided to concentrate on the language-based elements, although it was found that taking into accounts other signs, such as images, added an extra-dimension to the analysis. It was helpful to analyse school practices and objects for their explicit and implicit "messages" they suggested to the young people. Here, Foucault's dimensions of "ethics" were regarded useful. Taken together, they allowed identifying the "moral obligations" that were placed on the young people, that is the person they supposed to become, the parts on which and ways in which they were encouraged to work on themselves. These analytical dimensions associated with the concept of "ethics" were found to be particularly appropriate to study the topic of 'aspiration', which is immanently concerned with ideas on young people's future selves. Furthermore, they reflect a move in education and society more generally towards calling for more self-regulation (Cruikshank, 1996).

In comparison with policy texts and teachers' accounts, the young people's accounts can be characterised as more concrete than abstract, using everyday language and drawing on personal experience more than abstract ideas. Their talk therefore resembled the "everyday discourse" described by Waldschmidt et al. (2007). However, the degree of abstractness varied according to the interview format: the group discussions, in which the young people were encouraged to discuss ideas conveyed in the school, tended to produce general reasoning, whereas the individual interview, in which the young people were asked about their personal plans, elicited more personal accounts.

Following on from the assumption that discourse produces resistance and counter discourse, the young people's accounts were analysed along these dimensions. For the analysis of the group discussions in particular, the idea of "negotiation" was found useful. With the help of this concept, the young people's way of reconciling different ideas and demands could be identified. The concept of resistance proved difficult to apply as the conceptual leap from concrete data to the abstract

interpretation was not straightforward. Furthermore, as shown in Chapter 4, it can be assumed that numerous forms of resistance exist, which makes the concept difficult to narrow down. In agreement with other authors (Armstrong & Murphy, 2012; Burman, 1996; Riessman, 2000), it was found that resistance tended to be partial; while a young person's statement could be read as a resistance towards one aspect, it could be seen as expressing agreement in another one.

Therefore, the distinction suggested by Armstrong and Murphy (2012) between "conceptual" and "behavioural" resistance was found useful to some extent in this study. The research could identify tensions between agreeing with the "logics" underlying the discourse and personally adopting suggested aims and behaviours. Ideas, for example on the value of Higher Education were not rejected generally, but rejected as a possibility *for oneself*. In the words of Armstrong and Murphy (2012), there could be "conceptual" agreement, but "behavioural" resistance, or more specifically in relation to the focus of this thesis: resistance at a "personal" level. This form of resistance was manifest not (only) in deliberate deviant behaviour, as the concept of "behavioural resistance" suggests, but tended to occur in the form of an inability to comply with the "moral obligations" suggested by the school. It is therefore suggested here that the concept of "behavioural" resistance needs some further specification when applied to an educational context.

Further forms of resistance were identified. This included the rejection of demands by dissociating from different groups and individuals who personified these demands. One example was the rejection of adopting aspirational attributes such as a strong academic work ethic, specific (life) styles and the identity of "high achievers". Going beyond the discursive perspective, this form of resistance could be interpreted as linked with present and future identities, which as other authors have suggested, are an outcome of their position in intersecting social positions (Archer, 2008; Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2002). This form of resistance could thus be called resistance against "identity demands".

Next to identifying resistance, the study could also identify instances in which ideas from policy were adopted, but used in a different context or given a new meaning. The term "appropriation" was regarded as suitable to capture this process. One example of this were the young people drawing on ideas on self-realisation and choice as suggested by the school, but envisaged occupational aims which did not comply with what was presented as "aspirational" in school. These young people can thus be seen as adopting ideas on self-realisation and aspirational attributes while directing them towards personal aims which did not (always) converge with aims regarded as legitimate in policy discourse. Using Foucault's terminology, these young people "diverted" these ideas "to their own purposes" (Foucault, 1979). This, moreover, suggests that the young people exercised agency when negotiating the messages in the school and constructing their futures.

The analysis of the young people's negotiations of school discourse also gave some insights into how the young people's social positions and their experiences of disadvantage impacted on their willingness and possibility to adopt discursive positions and "logics". Although this study cannot give an exhaustive range of influences and make claims about their strengths, it can point towards what needs to be taken into account. The study showed that context becomes relevant with respect to young people's possibilities, their identities as shaped by their socio-cultural environment, and their experience of disadvantage and poverty.

11.5 Implications for further research, policy and practice

This section will show how this research opens up areas for further research and which conclusions can be drawn for policy and practice. The first part focuses on implications of this study for further research, while the second part combines recommendations for policy and educational practice.

11.5.1 Implications for research
This research has concentrated on a small group of young people in a particular institutional and geographical setting. Therefore, further research could explore how

aspiration discourses are enacted and negotiated in other schools and locations. Furthermore, this study showed young people's thinking about their future at the stage of making decisions about their post-school futures. It showed that a group of young people aligned themselves closely with the idea of success and meritocracy. This brings up the question of how young people's life aims and the underpinning discourses change after they have left school. Further research could examine how their constructions develop with experiences in post-compulsory education. This could complement existing research looking at identity work that has to be done by non-traditional students in Higher Education.

The findings of this study showed that the young people's negotiations of discourses on aspiration included negotiations of ideas of intelligence. Certain notions of being "smart" were rejected, while at the same time, being labelled as not "smart" seemed to produce perceptions of deficit. Furthermore, there seemed to be contradicting ideas present in the school as to what extent "intelligence", "potential" and "talent" was fixed or malleable. This suggests that further research is needed to unpick ideas of how intelligence is constructed and how this contributes to young people's perceptions of educational and occupational destinations. This would also illuminate how understandings of "intelligence" contribute to reproducing class inequalities, as well as providing a means to imagine upward social mobility for some young people.

This research furthermore highlighted some tensions between the demand to "aim high" and the aims considered desirable by young people. This implies the need for further research to identify how possible alternative ways of constructing futures can be understood. Conceptualisations in this vein could provide further understanding of the drivers and values underlying young people's constructions of desirable futures, as well as promoting more diversity with regard to what counts as "legitimate" future aims. Moreover, further research could examine how young people translate their various aspirations into occupational and educational trajectories. The finding in this research that the young people tend to envisage jobs which allow realising working-class principles through "new" jobs deserves further attention.

One of the conclusions of this study was that in order to understand how discursive positions are taken up, resisted and appropriated, it is necessary to take context into account. With respect to the young people, it was shown that context is relevant both with respect to the young people's living circumstances and social positions (extra-discursive context) and with respect to discursive repertoires which are present in spheres outside the school (discursive contexts). As this study could only point to several of these contextual dimensions, further research is needed to examine these in more depth. Future projects could examine the relationship between policy and school discourse and discourses present in local communities and their roots in socio-economic and cultural history or could focus on young people's discursive negotiations of public discourse against the background of their experiences of social disadvantage.

The need to consider the extra-discursive context and the social positions when examining discourse "in situ" also calls for extending existing discourse analytic perspectives. This could mean exploring further the possibility of bringing together post-structuralist theory focused on discourse with critical or critical-realist approaches, which consider extra-discursive social structures. In particular, approaches which assume that young people's ways of thinking about the future are shaped by embodied dispositions which arise from their positions in socio-economic structures might complement the discourse perspective.

This study has shown that Foucaultian Discourse Analysis has the potential to capture not only discursive features expressed in language, but also its manifestation in institutional practices, in images, in the organisation of time and space and bodily practices. Because of the practical constraints, the analysis in this study concentrated mainly on language-based data. Further research might therefore examine how official discourses are enacted through a range of processes and practices in educational settings. This could illuminate further how discourse provides possibilities for action and experience of young people, as well as possibilities for resistance. Consequently, a wider understanding of how power is at work in educational practice could be reached.

11.5.2 Implications for policy and practice

One focus of this thesis has been to examine the ways in which policy and schools construct 'aspiration' as a problem and consequently place certain demands on schools and young people. It could be shown that, by problematising the unrealised "potential" of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged young people – and their will to do change this – the "problem" of and "solution" for educational and social inequalities was located in the young people's inner dispositions. This suggests a dilemma for policy and educational practice. While, on the one hand, the dominant discourse on aspiration and success could be seen as empowering young people to overcome disadvantage, it could also be regarded as ascribing young people a deficit. Furthermore, by targeting individual dispositions, it could be argued that educational intervention addressed "problems" which are rooted in wider structures of inequality and should be addressed at a large scale. This dilemma can be approached at different levels.

At an individual level, this research has shown that discourses on aspiration and success seem to provide "psychological capital" (Bradford & Hey, 2007) that allowed some young people to adopt Higher Education as a personal aim and display the attitudes to pursue this. Since the ability among young people to align themselves with dominant discourse appeared to depend to a great deal on the young people's attainment, it is suggested that providing young people with a meritocratic narrative needs to go hand in hand with creating the possibilities to do so. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the narrative of "success", which portrays educational achievement as a way to higher-level occupations and upward social mobility, presents a promise that needs to be met with opportunities for quality employment after graduation. Otherwise, it risks alienation and might deter future generations of young people from Higher Education.

The finding that some of the young people have difficulties to adopt the position of a high-achieving person and their strong reaction against being positioned as belonging to the group of people who are not "smart enough" and "unsuccessful" points towards the potential emotional damage discourses of aspiration and success can

cause in young people who are not willing or able to comply with the demand to be academically achieving (see also Brown, 2011). The perception of being labelled as not "smart" also indicates the need to broaden the notions of 'intelligence' and 'achievement'. This might entail a better recognition of achievements beyond narrow academic achievements, thus enabling young people to gain self-worth. In England, the current government seems to be heading in a different direction by minimising the number of vocational qualifications counting towards a school's league tables (Department for Education, 2012). In the Scottish context, the new Curriculum for Excellence promises a wider approach valuing a broad range of skills (Education Scotland, 2012a), but it is doubtful if it will challenge the hierarchy of educational qualifications.

The identified tensions between the demand to "aim higher" and the types of occupations and educational routes some of the young people wished to pursue also raises the question of whether the discourse of aspiration means "coercing" young people to pursue "middle-class" occupations and lifestyles which do not coincide with their values and interests (Archer et al., 2010). On the other hand, it could be argued that not doing so would mean depriving young people of the opportunity to live a materially more comfortable life and leave them "in their place". Education practitioners are therefore caught in a dilemma. Given the current distribution of life chances according to educational achievements and occupational status, it is suggested here that education practitioners should not be criticised for making young people aware of the benefits of academic achievements in order to enter more highly-skilled occupations. At the same time, it is suggested that schools should convey the idea to young people that a range of occupational and later life aims are of value.

It can also be argued that while it is a laudable aim to argue for young people's freedom of "choice", it also needs to be taken into account that their choices are influenced and constrained by their experiences of poverty and disadvantage. "Real" choice would, therefore, entail equipping young people and their families with the necessary educational, as well as material resources, as has been argued by authors who draw on the "capability approach" by Amartya Sen (Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sellar

et al., 2009; Watts & Bridges, 2006). This suggests that policies need to go beyond raising aspiration and tackle the material poverty that prevails in the UK. The approaches of the current government to tackle poverty, however, seem to rely on activating individuals to take up employment (see, for example, the current government's strategy to tackle child poverty, Department for Work and Pensions & Department for Education, 2011), underpinned by the same logic as efforts to raise aspiration. It can be expected that these efforts will not prove successful unless (worthwhile and decently paid) employment is available (Cumbers, Helms, & Keenan, 2009).

Furthermore, it can be argued that equipping (young) people with the will to be upwardly socially mobile does not challenge the occupational hierarchies and inequalities in the distribution of resources. Consequently, it has been argued that the "meritocratic myth" reinforces rather than challenges wider structures of inequality (see Radnor, Koshy, & Taylor 2007). The thesis has shown that the meritocratic logic remained largely unchallenged in policy, school and by young people. Instead, the young people tended to either align themselves with the meritocratic promise of a "better" life or dissociate themselves from lifestyles considered socially inferior in order to achieve a respectable, materially secure life. This suggests that increasing inequalities need to tackled and that the risk of living in poverty needs to be minimised. This, of course, cannot be realised without tackling wage rates and the distribution of wealth. Furthermore, realising upward mobility at a larger scale might entail downward mobility – a possibility that is silenced in current policy discourse (White, 2011).

The way young people rendered certain educational and occupational routes desirable, by referring, for example, to the wish to be independent, have an income soon and perform activities which allow them to be mobile, communicating and helping others, also points to the need for educators to understand young people's preferences more thoroughly. This also involves an understanding of how these preferences are shaped through the young people's experience of and position in structures of disadvantage. It is suggested that educational practice can therefore

benefit from research and sociological reflection, which could be realised through co-operation between researchers and practitioners. A more thorough understanding of young people's preferences could consequently lead to providing young people with ideas on the different ways of realising their preferences – and thus make different routes "thinkable" (Archer, 2011).

There might also be a need for reflection on how social inequalities "work" and are reproduced. This could be addressed on the one hand by providing young people with strategies on how to navigate structures in the form of admission procedures to universities and by shattering the myth that university is only for a few extraordinarily gifted individuals. On the other hand, this could involve reflecting on social inequality and its reproduction more widely. This might open up room to think about alternative visions of a good life, which incorporates a wider range of "beings" and "doings" (Watts & Bridges, 2006) and achievements.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Observation schedule

1. Set up of the activity

- Name and aim of the activity?

- How is 'aspiration' defined (also implicitly)? Which are the reasons for aiming high which are transmitted?

  - What kind(s) of aspiration(s) are addressed? Which subject positions are provided for young people?
  - Are there different aspirations/subject positions promoted for different pupils?
  - What possibilities/appeals for action are given?

2. Carrying out of the activity

- Which teaching methods are used?

- Which materials are used?

- How can the communication between teachers and pupils and among pupils be described?

- What type of language is used?

3. Pupils

- How do the engage in the classroom activities?

- What are the young people's immediate reactions to messages on 'aspiration'?
  - What are the verbal reactions?
  - What type of language and which expressions are used?
  - What is the reaction in terms of gestures, gaze and facial expression?

- How do the young people speak about themselves and their future plans?
  - (How) do they negotiate the subject positions provided?
  - What futures do they imagine for themselves?
  - How do they relate their own ideas to those presented in the activities?

Appendix 2: Topic guide focus groups

1. Prompt: School motto
I brought an image of the school motto. Have you seen it?

- What do you think about this motto?
    - What do you think the school means by [central term in school motto]?
    - What is meant by [school motto]? In which way can it be realised?
    - What is [central term in school motto] for you?

2. Prompt: School poster on 'choice'
I brought this photograph of a poster saying "Life is full of choices. Choose carefully". Have you seen it around the school?

- What does the slogan on the poster mean to you?
    - What does "choose carefully" mean to you?
    - What kind of choices do you think you have to make?
- Do you think the slogan on the poster is true or not true?
    - Is life full of choices?
    - Do you have to choose carefully?

3. Prompt: 'Motivational' posters in the school corridors
I brought some photographs of posters in the school corridors. Can I ask you to pick one and tell me what it means to you?

- Do you agree with the slogan on the poster?
    - What makes you agree/disagree with the slogan?
- Do you like the slogan on the poster?
    - Can you say what you like about it/what you don't like about it?
    - Could you reword it, so that you would like it?
- Do you have a slogan or motto that you would like to see in the school? Do you have your own motto that you follow?
- Why do you think the school puts up the posters?

4. Prompt: 'Board of Achievements'
I brought a photograph of the 'Board of Achievements' – have you ever read it?

- Who do you think gets on the 'Board of Achievements'?
    - What do you need to do to get onto it?
- Do you think there are people who should be on it, but are not?
- Do you think you will on the 'Board of Achievements' one day?
    - What would you need to do to get on it?
- Would you like to be on the 'Board of Achievements'?
    - What makes you want to be/not want to be on the board?
- Is there anyone on the 'Board of Achievements' who you would like to be like?

5. Prompt: Pie chart with school's leavers' destinations from previous year

I have brought this pie chart which shows what last year's leavers went on to do, if they went on to college, uni, to do an apprenticeship or into employment. That's the ones who left school after S5 or S6.

- What do you think about these percentages? Did you expect these numbers?
    - Do you think your year group will be the same or different? Why do you think you will be the same/different?
- In which bit do you see yourselves?
    - How certain is it that you are going to do this? What does it depend on?
    - What is attractive about going to uni/being unemployed/going into employment/going to college/doing an apprenticeship?

6. Prompt: Photographs of different occupations and activities

I have brought a number of pictures which show people doing different jobs and activities.

- What do you think about these jobs and activities?
    - What are the advantages of being a … doing…?
    - What are the disadvantages of being a … doing…?
- Which of the jobs are easier to achieve and which are more difficult? What would you need to do to get there?
- Is there anything that you would like to do yourself?
    - What is attractive about it?
- Is there anything you would not want to do yourself?
    - What is unattractive about it?
- Is there anything you would like to do that is not pictured on the photographs?
- If you think about a good friend: What would you recommend him or her to do?
    - How important is the salary? How important are his/her interests?
    - What would she or he have to do to get there?
    - Do you think other people would agree that that's a good aim?

Appendix 3: Topic guide individual interviews with staff

- Could you tell me about the role you have in the school?
  - In which activities are you involved?

- One of the school's main areas of transformation that of raising aspiration. How would you say this features in your work?
  - Which of the activities you're involved in are especially geared towards raising aspirations?

- What relevance does 'aspiration' have in your view?
  - In which way is 'aspiration' relevant/irrelevant?
  - How is 'aspiration' related to young people's achievement? How is it related to their later life outcomes?
  - Is 'aspiration' especially important given the socio-economic background of the pupils?

- In which way would you say 'raising aspiration' is relevant?
  - Is it relevant with respect to the individual or would you say it has wider relevance?
  - What other efforts are important besides 'raising aspiration'?

- In your opinion, how should or can aspiration be raised?
  - Who is responsible for doing this? (e.g. home, school, other institutions)

- How would you judge the school's efforts of raising aspiration?
  - How do you determine the school's success in terms of raising aspiration?
  - Would you say there are difficulties in 'raising aspiration'?

- How would you define an "aspirational" pupil?

Appendix 4: Topic guide individual interviews with pupils

1. Imagined future
- When you think of life in ten years time: How do you imagine it to be?
  - What would you do in terms of a job? What is attractive about this?
  - Who would you be with?
  - How and where would you live?

- When you think of yourself in ten years time: How do you think you would describe yourself?
  - Is there anyone you would say: I want to be like them? What is it about them that you find fascinating?

- What you have just described to me. Is this how you would ideally want to live?
  - (If not) What would be your ideal life look like?

- If you could do anything you wanted what would you do?
  - What is it what makes it difficult to realise this?

- When you think about yourself and your future: How would you not like it to be to like?

2. Plans for the future
- You talked about how you imagine your life in ten years time. How do you think you will get there?

- What are your plans for the next few years?
  - What is good about doing …/going to …?

- What made you think about doing…/going to…?
  - (If related to activities in school/hobbies, job): Can you describe what you did/do there?
  - Are there any people you think influenced your plans?

- What do people around you say about your plans? What kind of advice do they give you?
  - How does this make you feel about your plans?

- Did you always want to do …/go to …? Or have you thought about doing something else at some point?
  - What made you change your mind?

- Have you thought about other options
  - What made you change your mind?
  - Why is this no longer an option for you?

- How likely is it you can realise your plans?
    - Which difficulties could you come across?
    - Do you have any backup plans and how do they look like?

- What do you think you will do after you finished doing …/ going to…?
    - How easy will it be to realise your plans?

- To finish up: What would you say is most important for you in life?
    - What is important apart from a job?

Appendix 5: Participant information sheet

Research project: Discourses on aspiration and their negotiation in the school context

Information sheet for participants

What is the study about?

In this research project we want to find out how the school tries to convey messages on aspiration and how they are received by the pupils. This involves finding out what aspiration means to teachers and how they think it is addressed within the school.

The research will contribute to understanding how aspiration is put into practice by the school and how young people react to this. It is expected that this will give insight into the ways in which young people make decisions about their futures and how this can be supported by the school.

What is involved?

We would like to conduct an interview of about half an hour with you. It will be based on an interview guide with a couple of open-ended questions. If you agree, we would like to tape-record the interview.

The participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason.

What will happen to the data?

Anything you say will be handled strictly confidential and anonymous. The results will be published within a PhD thesis and in research journals. No individuals will be identifiable in these publications.

Who can I contact about the research?

Konstanze Spohrer will carry out the research. She is a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde. You can also contact Dr. Daniela Sime, who supervises the research project.

Appendix 6: Participant consent form

Research project: Discourses on aspiration and their negotiation in the school context

Participant consent form

1. The research has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I am aware that my involvement in the study is voluntary and I may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason. If I do withdraw I may ask that any information I have provided be disregarded.

3. I agree to be audio-recorded.

4. I agree to participate in the research project.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 7: Overview of analysed policy documents

Government documents and reports

Title	Date of publication	Author/s	Type of document
Excellence in schools	1997	Department for Education and Skills	Schools White Paper
Higher Education for the 21st century: Response to the Dearing Report.	1998	Department for Education and Employment.	Government response
Schools: Achieving success	2001	Department for Education and Skills	Schools White Paper
14-19: Opportunity and Excellence	2003	Department for Education and Skills	Guidance paper
The Future of Higher Education.	2003	Department for Education and Skills	Higher Education White Paper
14-19 Education and Skills White Paper	2005	Department for Education and skills	White Paper
Higher Standards, Better Schools for All. More choice for parents and pupils	2005	Department for Education and skills	Schools White Paper
Widening participation in Higher Education. Creating opportunity, realising potential, achieving excellence.	2006	Department for Education and Skills	Higher Education White Paper
More choices, more chances a strategy to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Scotland	2006	Scottish Executive	Strategy paper
Raising	2007	Department for	Green Paper

expectations: Staying in education and training post-16 and subsequent policy papers.		Education and Skills	
Creating a high aspiration culture for young people in the UK	2007	Ipsos Mori funded by the Sutton Trust in partnership with HM Treasury	Presentation of findings from Research study
Evaluation of the Higher Futures4U project: final report.	2007	Arrowsmith J.; & Robinson J.	Report on evaluation of project
Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities.	2008	Communities and Local Government Department for Children, Schools and Families	Analysis and discussion paper
The extra mile: How schools succeed in raising aspirations in deprived communities	2008	Department for Children, Schools and Families	Project description
Getting on, getting ahead - A discussion paper	2008	Cabinet Office	Discussion Paper
Quality, Choice and Aspiration	2009	Department for Children, Schools and Families	Strategy Paper
Unleashing aspiration. The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions.	2009	Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, chaired by Rt Hon Alan Milburn MP	Report
New opportunities. Fair chances for the future	2009	HM Government	White Paper
Introducing to reaching potential by raising aspirations workshop.	2010	Learning and Skills Improvement Service	Module Outline
The Importance of Teaching. The Schools White	2010	Department for Education	White Paper

Paper 2010			
Child poverty strategy: A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives	2011	Department for Work and Pensions/ Department for Education,	Strategy Paper
Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility	2011	HM Government	Strategy Paper
Inspiring Communities, changing behaviour	2011	Communities and Local Government	Project Guide
Baroness Warsi announces cross-Whitehall internship programme	2011	Cabinet Office	Online article

Speeches and other communications by politicians

Title	Year	Speaker/author and function	Type of document
We must never concede the politics of aspiration for all	2005	Tony Blair, Prime Minister	Newspaper article
Making British poverty history, Speech to Chance UK	2007	David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative party	Speech
Speech to Labour Party Conference,	2007	Gordon Brown, Leader of the Labour Party	Party conference speech
Mansion House Speech	2007	Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer	Speech
Rising to the Challenge	2008	Gordon Brown, Leader of the Labour Party	Speech
We use our schools to break down class barriers	2008	Gordon Brown, Prime Minister	Newspaper article
We can break the glass ceiling	2010	Gordon Brown, Prime Minister	Newspaper article

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Oral statement on the schools White Paper	2011	Michel Gove, Secretary of State for Education	Oral statement
Speech on social mobility	2011	Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister	Speech

Appendix 8: Statements and practices identified in observations

1. Statements in teachers' interviews and observations
Pupil success as aim of the school
Pupils' success is school's/teachers' aim
School/teachers expect attainment (behaviour) from you
Enable pupils to lead better life = task of the school
Requirements for success in school
Need for resilience
Resilience = not giving up in the face of difficulties
Good behaviour
Decision to be successful (and subsequently make effort)
Hard work (-> attainment -> getting to uni)
Deliberate choices, i.e. regarding subject choice
Requirements of world of work/for success after leaving school
Educational qualifications as prerequisite for success on labour market
Attainment in school -> occupational opportunities
Further qualifications -> occupational opportunities
Attitudinal characteristics/"work ethics" (e.g. to get to university)
Resilience
Persistence
Willingness to study hard
Commitment
Developing positive attitudes/behaviour
Set of skills:
Interpersonal/ "soft" skills
Learning strategies
Skills for work
Acting regarding post-school destination
Being proactive in obtaining destination (considering competitive situation)

Making deliberate choice (based on information and personal interests)
Characteristics of successful people/inspirational people
Resilient against barriers and difficulties (prerequisite); brave
Rich, occupation with high earning potential (consequences)
Positive influence on other people's lives or society
Contributed to society through visible and acclaimed achievement
Have a profession of high status and influence
Gain public recognition and fame
Are role models
Are confident
Are talented
Overcomes difficulties and barriers
Attainment as positive/desirable
(overlaps with practice of creating elite)
Intelligence as desirable characteristic
High attainment -> successful/good future
Attainment is rewarded/valued
High attainment = being elite among pupils
Definition of aspiration
Hopes and dreams for the future
Imagining one's future
Achievement in school
Planning to go to university
Making deliberate decisions in education
Aiming for qualified/professional occupation
Desirable destinations
Doing a (further) degree deserves esteem
Because it is hard work
Because it leads to recognised title (doctor)
Occupation that requires little formal qualification as undesirable

Having an aim in life as laudable (overlaps with definition of aspiration)
Having a plan for your life despite disadvantaged background
But: Not all courses/HE institutions are equally valuable
2. Reasoning of teachers
Characteristics of pupils
Not posh
Low aspirations, lack of determination
Low academic attainment
Good and problematic pupils
Highly attaining = "stars", crème de la crème
Problematic pupils: disabled vs. behaviourally difficult
Some don't use their abilities
Some don't want to learn
Illness -> problematic behaviour
Diet -> problematic behaviour
Parents' negative attitudes -> problematic behaviour
Characteristics of local area
Problematic lifestyles
Reasons for low aspirations among pupils
Inadequate role models
Lack of parental support vs. parents generally supportive (LE)
Worklessness among parents
Lack of cultural resources
Parents spoil children
Suitable destinations for individual pupils
Staying on at school is not suitable for each pupil ->
Low attainment -> leaving school
3. Practices observed in interactions
Warning of demands of life after school

Asking pupils to actively look for destinations
Asking pupils to develop attitudes/behaviour (rehearsing attitudes)
Naming, having and acting towards goals
Asking pupils to make deliberate choices/ think about and act with regard to the future
Asking pupils to name occupational goals and educational destinations
Asking pupils to name plans for the future
Glamorising academic achievement/ making academic achievement attractive
Presenting intelligence/achievement as desirable quality
Rewarding achievement (also by selection for activities)
Creating an elite of pupils who attain highly (and speak about them)
Associating it with privilege
Making Higher Education, professional destination and "success" attractive
Associating it with "fame" (through role models)
Illustrating benefits/rewards
Instilling attitudes for success
Illustrating required characteristics through role models
Rehearsing attitudes
Making differences between pupils/Classifying pupils
Foreseeing destinations for pupils/matching pupils with suitable destinations
Selecting/organising pupils according to attainment
Familiarising pupils with FE/HE
Knowledge and information
Insight into activities related to destination
Conveying skills/techniques needed
Fostering attainment

(overlaps with glamorising attainment/grouping pupils)
Expecting attainment
Valuing high attaining pupils
Grouping pupils according to attainment
Conveying skills and knowledge for success after school
Knowledge about learning/ways of learning
"Soft" skills and attitudes
Knowledge about good lifestyle/behaviour
Subject knowledge

Appendix 9: Themes and messages identified in school posters

Broad themes

- Being active; exploring; leaving comfort zone
- Strong, self-reliant individual: determined, persevering, confident
- Everybody can influence/make a difference to the world/efficacy
- Realising one's talents
- Standing up for others
- Having unknown talents
- Being a winner
- A better world/love

Messages

- Everybody has a innate talent/potential
- You have the duty to fulfil your potential; live your capabilities
- Make choices/decisions; make the right choices
- You can decide who you want to be as a person
- Changing the world begins with changing one's attitudes/Change your attitudes/Change has to start with yourself
- You will be a winner if you have the right attitudes: optimistic, determined and hard-working
- Do what is right although it might be hard
- Be self-controlled; decide to not act out everything you can
- Go beyond your comfort-zone; explore the unknown; do things you might be afraid of
- You are responsible for applying your talent through work
- (Strong people) learn from mistakes
- Stand by your friends
- A small number of people/citizens can change the world/you can change the world
- Don't give up and you will succeed
- You are capable of more than you think
- Don't be a passive bystander
- Luck is in your own hands
- A world of Peace/love is desirable
- You keep organisations going if you commit to a group effort

Promoted values/qualities

- Optimism
- Work, being hard-working
- Determinism
- Persistence, perseverance
- Being active
- Success

- Contributing to society/making the world better
- Choice, making decisions
- "Good"/"right" attitudes (often remains general)
- Character strength/self-control/integrity

Underlying assumptions

- having innate ability but being restricted in realising it though internal, attitudinal barriers such as
  - lack of confidence
  - Not knowing one's innate potential
  - pessimistic, fatalistic; being passive/phlegmatic
  - Being restricted in outlook
  - Lacking determinism, perseverance
  - Not being prepared to work hard
- Having "wrong" attitudes, behaviour
- Being exposed to harmful social influences -> having to rely on oneself, making decisions independent from environment
- Potential/Danger to not be successful, be a failure, looser

Positioning pupils/Demand on pupils

- Change your attitudes, behaviour (in order to be a winner/successful)
- Realise your innate potential, strive to become better
- Free yourself from bad influences of your environment; make decisions about your life independent from environment
- Become someone different/live different life than those around you (who are not successful/winners)
- Contribute to the world around you

Appendix 10: Themes identified in individual interviews and group discussions

Success/imagined future life

Doing something rather than nothing/sitting in the house all day/being "on the giro"
Variation: "end up on the street", "being in trouble",
Variation: "low paid jobs": working at "ASDA"/Tesco, "McDonalds"
Personification: "being a failure", "bums", "addicts"
Experience: know people who are living on benefits, seen what drugs do to people; know local labour market and scarcity of jobs
Influence: parents; working class (?) discourse of respectability through (qualified/skilled?) work; claiming benefits as taboo

Have a "good job" that guarantees good lifestyle
Job as way to earn enough money to have good lifestyle which is associated with having own possessions, particularly: own house, own car
Way of supporting one's prospective family
In order not struggle with money, not be in debt

Attainment in school → qualifications → FE/HE/training/work → job

Important in life

Staying close to friends and family members (often associated with staying in the local area)
Wish to stay local expressed through familiarity: this is where I grew up, used to it, I don't know other place; desire to be close to family and friends,
Often also associated feeling secure and safe, both emotionally and physically: know where to go and where to "watch your back",
Often: have own family

But in some cases also wish to move to "better area", associated with: quieter, less "trouble"/fighting, opportunity to have big house

Dreams/ideal life

Living far away, travelling
Associated with better climate, better lifestyle
But: at the same time wish to stay in the local area: moving away associated with: leaving family and friends, feeling uncomfortable, not oneself ("would feel weird, I would feel uncomfortable; "you won't be yourself", "start being shier"); also: not feeling secure and safe, both emotionally and physically as opposed to known area you know where to go and where to "watch your back"
Influence: Sometimes experiences of territorial divisions

Being famous person: actress/singer; football player
Associated with money, fame/being looked up to, lifestyle: being able to travel
But also wish to "stay the same", "be myself"

Desirable occupation

Doing something active/practical/involving rather than sitting in an office – getting paid for "actually doing something" instead of nothing
Positive connotations: "doing something involving", talking to people, meeting people, "hand-on", "helping others" (caring for them, making them feel better, passing on skills/motivation; making them safe), "you're moving about"

Usually associated with **doing something I like doing/I'm good at/I've always wanted to do**
Influence: Experience/familiarity with the activity related to job: beauty, sports, travelling; experiencing jobs that are undesirable (often exerted through family members)
Parents: Do whatever you choose to do and work towards it

Way to get there: effort at school (stick in) → qualifications/grades needed → get job

Get work to earn money (sometimes intertwined with having enjoyable job)
Money associated with "good/decent lifestyle"; "have own house", have a car, sometimes: support family
Influence: pressure to earn money; lack of goods in family (beyond discourse)

Ways to realise this: leave school at earliest possibility → find job/FE, training that leads to a job fast → Find job (through training scheme or personal contacts)

Ways to realise this: invest in FE/HE → get "better job" → earn better money

No occupational plans, go to university to continue preferred subjects

Occupation that brings status/recognition (usually professional occupation such as doctor), good pay -> good lifestyle (different area, big house)

Undesirable destinations
The desirable destinations sometimes seen as **desirable activities in contrast with undesirable alternatives**

Staying on at school
Associated with inactivity, being constrained/regulated and neglected/rejected by teachers ("where you do nothing", where you are "treated like a wane", where "teachers don't care"),
But: has to be negotiated with: staying on and obtaining qualifications as necessary to realise desired destination

Doing nothing/being "on the giro"
Variation: minimum wage, McDonalds jobs
Associated with being passive, isolated, having low status (McDonalds: "the lowest you can get")
Images: Lying in bed all day, sitting in the house all day

Sit in an office all day
Associated with passivity, boredom, not deserving your earnings (would be too boring, getting paid for not doing anything,
Images: "suit and tie", "sitting at a desk/computer all day", "stuck in one place"

In some cases (boys): Do heavy, dirty, unpleasant work: "wouldn't like boggin'"
Associated with unpleasant conditions: getting up early, getting dirty, wet
Personification: "being fat and bald", being "stupid",

Ways of realising desired destinations

Get work/apprenticeship
Getting work as soon as possible as a way to earn money and/or to do something that is enjoyable (as opposed to school)

Leave school/get necessary qualifications and go to college
College associated with "doing/concentrating on just one subject instead of many", doing subject you like; getting necessary qualifications for HE; getting experience/something on the CV to go on to further education and training

College, then university
Perception that **university would be a as "too big step/jump"**;
University associated with requirement to be intelligent on the one hand: "for the smart", i.e. for other people; but also: requiring independent learning style (need to get yourself up),
Images: "big", "scary"
→ carries risk of failure: "might be too hard and I would just give up".
Therefore: college as step towards university (get used to impendent study; get necessary qualifications: "gradually build up to be able to go to university"; college as "one step up from school", then "prepared better"; perceived as safer option: I just go to college, safer to go that way (…) Through college and then to university.
For some pupils perceived as reachable through effort and building up qualifications: "try a lot to get into university"

Confirmed by drawing on personal examples: X (e.g. family member) went to uni, he/she is really smart; X did graduation and all that: really big

Realising desired destinations through effort and qualifications:
Images of effort: "stick in" (at school), "try your best"; "keep revising"
Building up towards goal through sequence of qualifications, also to have something to fall back to
Wish to show effort has to be negotiated with difficulty to meet standards

Perception of FE/HE institutions

College
Possibility to concentrate on one subject instead of several -> concentrate on one subject -> have better results
Chance to pursue enjoyable activity/subject
Chance to obtain qualifications necessary for further path (step towards HE, see above)
Way to obtain necessary skills/qualifications for entry into labour market
Also associated with being more independent, being treated like an adult, being among more mature people → lead more independent, adult life

University
University associated with requirement to be intelligent: "for the smart", which often means: not for me
Difficult to get access to: entry requirement, sometimes associated with effort in school which would mean not to have a social life
Associated with independent learning style ("need to get yourself up", not "spoon fed" as in school)
Associated with being successful, achieving, doing something with one's life
Way to prove that people from the area can achieve contrary to public perception
In some cases: opportunity to pursue enjoyable subjects, become mature person
Chance to realise career plan, chance to obtain jobs that are better paid and of higher status, more interesting; better options and chances on labour market; recognitions by others/reputation of degrees and titles
Images: "big", "scary", for the "smart". "big step/jump"; if you go there: "genius". "Looked at better"

Modern university
By many associated with accessibility, diversity, modernity ("more for everybody")
Not requiring too high qualifications (in contrast with traditional university)
Attractive as close to own area, central ("it's in town")
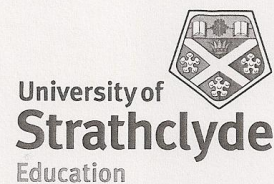
Traditional university
Requiring high qualifications and intelligence ("you need like ten As")
Scary, awe-inspiring ("Howards")
Difficult to access if from [local area] ("pure snobbery", you're from [local area] alright")
Attractive: beautiful buildings

Appendix 11: Ethical approval

Notice of Departmental Ethics Committee Decision

Date: 6th January 2010

Applicant: **Daniela Sime (K Spohrer)**

Title: Discourses on aspiration and their negotiation in the school context

Approval Of Investigation

The Departmental Ethics Committee confirm ethics approval for the above investigation strictly within the terms as advised on the application.

When your investigation is completed we would welcome a short note indicating completion and advising of any ethical matters that may have arisen but which were not anticipated within your application.

The committee wishes you success in your investigation.

For the Departmental Ethics Committee

David Wallace (Chair)