# A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF ACCESS TO SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND CAREER CHOICES

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# CONTENTS

**Appendices**

Appendix 1: College consent letter
Appendix 2: Student consent letter
Appendix 3: Social background questionnaire
Appendix 4: Interview schedule
Appendix 5: Reflective summary proforma,
Appendix 6: Individual summary of findings for each participant
Appendix 7: Tables of summaries of the findings

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# ABSTRACT

This IFS investigated the post-compulsory education and career choices of a sample of 'access to social work' students at an FE college with which I have professional links. A qualitative methodology was used to interview seven students, and quantitative methods were used to analyse a social background questionnaire. The following research questions were posed: (1) *Are the post-compulsory education decisions that 'access to social work' students make influenced by particular 'turning points'*?; (2) *Why do such students' choose 'caring' routes to HE*?; (3) *Are there any interconnections between 'turning points' and the pursuit of 'caring' routes to HE*? and (4) *How do 'non-traditional' students consider they are depicted in widening participation policy discourse and more generally?*

Significant findings include, post-compulsory education and career decision-making are generally inextricably linked, complex, non-linear and unique to the individual. Decisions in these areas are often the result of significant life events characterised by particular '*turning points'*, which can be both '*primary'* and '*secondary'*. However, the more cumulative effects of what I termed *'secondary turning points'* had the most impact on the development of self-identity and caring dispositions. Students' motivation to pursue particular education and 'caring' options can be classified as follows: '*turning bad experiences into good', 'gradual recognition', 'the philanthropic drive'* and *'the education imperative'*, suggesting influential factors are varied.

Extreme competition for places, problems with basic skills and limited economic, social and cultural capital created considerable barriers to higher education entry for the students in my study, a situation that has arguably been compounded by the marketisation of higher education. Only one student's application to study social work at a post-1992 University was successful, with the others having to consider taking longer routes to achieve their goals. Whilst social reproduction is a recognised problem among 'non-traditional' students, it may be a bigger issue than is currently recognised among students pursuing specific vocational routes, resulting in these students being doubly disadvantaged. My findings are pertinent to my professional practice within a post-1992 university, suggesting that 'access to social work' students need to be valued for the contribution they can make, and that more needs to be done to support their progression to higher education. Whilst more joint-working between higher education institutions and FE colleges may help, more direct government action is needed to address the pressing problems of social reproduction identified in this study.

## CHAPTER ONE

**1. Introduction**

This institution focused study (IFS) forms a pilot and precursor to the educational doctorate thesis. My study entailed a critical investigation of the post-compulsory education and career choices of students on two part-time 'access to social work' courses at a college of further education (FE) in South East England, which forms part of a consortium with my own higher education institution (HEI). Access courses students are commonly referred to as 'non-traditional' students because they have not followed the 'traditional' 'A' level route into higher education (HE) aged 18, and are considered beneficiaries of widening participation (WP) policy. The latter is a response from government to address the under-representation of students from particular socio-economic groups in HE, for example, those from low income and working class social backgrounds. Issues of under-representation in HE have been well documented in several official reports (see Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997; Kennedy, 1997; DfES, 2003a) and remain an enduring problem. Jones illustrates the key contribution of particular WP initiatives in promoting access to HE for 'non-traditional' students:

> Access to Higher education courses have played a key role in the growth of further and higher education by providing educational opportunities for adult learners who missed out on the conventional 'A' level route to university. In this respect the Access movement has been unique in its explicit attempts to redress the balance of educational disadvantage and to promote equality of opportunity within the higher education sector in the UK (2006: 485).

**1.1 Background and context**

Whilst WP initiatives such as access courses have had a modicum of success (i.e. participation rates among previously under-represented social classes have improved), such students remain clustered within the post-1992 universities with students from more privileged backgrounds still predominant among the old universities (Archer et al., 2003). In addition, students following the traditional 'A' level route are far more likely than those pursuing

vocational routes to be offered a HE place (Wolf, 2002; HEFCE, 2006). This phenomenon may be influenced by the discursive discourses within WP policy texts. It could be argued that implicit within the latter (see DfES, 2003a) is the notion that students on access courses have some how failed because they have not followed the 'traditional' route to HE aged eighteen, and are therefore in need of remedial support, for example, compensatory education (Ryan, 1971; Reay, 2001b; Whitty, 2001; Burke, 2005; Leathwood, 2006; Walsh, 2006). WP policy therefore seems to be predicated on a cultural deficit model, which unwittingly perpetuates the negative construction of 'non-traditional' students. There appears to be limited acknowledgement that these students' individual trajectories and associated life chances and choices may differ considerably, and may be influenced by what Hodkinson et al. (1996) refer to as particular *'turning points'* or circumstances. A theoretical aspect of my study (explored further in chapter two) therefore involved investigating whether any key '*turning points'* had influenced the education and career choices of the research participants. In undertaking this kind of investigation, I endeavoured to give voice to the lived experiences of students navigating their way through what I term the 'tough, rocky terrain' to HE entry. My study embraced a lifelong learning perspective, recognising that HE and career choices that are made are not necessarily linear, can be made at different points of the life cycle, and may be influenced by a number of different factors. For example, earlier influences and experiences such as parents and initial education all 'help to build the learning trajectory of individuals [and] leads [students] to consider HE as a possibility or not' (Gorard et al., 2006: 14 and 15).

## 1.2 Rationale

My *raison d'ệtre* for conducting a study critiquing WP policy relates to concerns mentioned previously, notably HE's perverse social reproductive function and the misrepresentation of particular students within particular policy texts. These issues are a persistent problem compromising equity and equal educational opportunities (Leathwood and O'Connor, 2003). Hence, my interest in WP is underpinned by a strong commitment to social justice. Watson (2006: 2) argues that 'at its heart widening participation is an issue of social justice'. The original intention was to track the entry and progression of a sample of students who had completed an 'access to social work' course, and who were enrolled on the BA Social Work at a university in the South East of England, an area where I had already undertaken some preliminary

investigation for 'Methods of Enquiry One and Two'. However, whilst undertaking the role of Social Work Admission Tutor for five years I became increasingly aware of the many challenges and barriers that students on vocational routes such as nursing and social work experience when attempting to gain access to HE. These students arguably have more 'hurdles to jump' than those pursuing non-vocational access routes to HE because of the professional entry requirements for social work training and extreme competition for places whilst, paradoxically, likely to experience similar socio-economic disadvantage and educational inequalities. In order to explore some of these issues further, I decided to focus my investigation on students enrolled on an 'access to social work' course at a college of FE. In addition to investigating key *'turning points'* influencing students' decisions to pursue post-compulsory education, I was also interested to explore why students opt to pursue 'caring' routes to HE, key influences on these kinds of choices, and barriers to HE participation. Whilst a recent review of widening participation research (Gorard et al., 2006) suggests there is now a sufficient body of literature exploring barriers to HE participation, this area of investigation was justified on a number of counts. First, there is a lack of research concentrating on FE per se (Hodkinson and James, 2003). Second, there seems to be a shortage of research investigating access students' experiences, especially with the combined focus of looking at influences on post-compulsory education and career choices, and associated barriers. Finally, whilst the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2006) has targeted investment on facilitating 'non-traditional' students' access to HE by supporting HE/FE partnerships, my professional experiences suggest more still needs to be done to break down the barriers to HE that still exist for these students. Hence, one of the key objectives of my study was to identify further ways of supporting 'non-traditional' students' access to HE in the context of my professional practice.

## 1.3 My research journey

My research journey has been a humbling experience, one where I have gained immense respect and admiration for the students depicted in WP discourse as 'lacking' or 'problematic'. Whilst at the time of the interviews some participants were struggling academically and several had not secured a HE place to study social work, all were making almost heroic efforts and sacrifices to achieve their goals. The majority of participants were also motivated by what seemed like an almost selfless commitment and determination to make a contribution to society.

Although previously aware that the journey to HE for 'non-traditional' students can be characterised by struggle, I had not fully appreciated how increasingly difficult it is for these students, both generally and *vis-à-vis* gaining access to HE, particularly with increased competition for HE places and with the advent of tuition fees. A key challenge I faced was how to adequately represent the rich, tapestry of experiences shared with me without fragmenting the data. I decided to analyse the data using a combination of more traditional methods of data analysis and narrative techniques, which enabled me to avoid overly dissecting the data and diluting the participants' stories whilst at the same time ensuring rigor *vis-à-vis* data analysis. It has been a challenging and arduous process completing this IFS, but at the same time rewarding and insightful. I feel extremely honoured that the participants of my study trusted me sufficiently to share key aspects of their lives with me.

## 1.4 Structure of the IFS

This IFS is structured into five chapters. This chapter sets the scene by outlining some of the issues and concerns pertinent to the IFS and provided a rationale for my investigation. Chapter two illustrates my personal and professional position *vis-à-vis* the IFS and reviews literature relevant to my field of enquiry. Chapter three outlines the research questions, illustrates the methodology employed for this IFS, identifies the field of enquiry, provides a general profile of the participants and discusses sampling and how access was negotiated. It also, discusses ethics, data collection and data analysis, provides an assessment of the value of the study and concludes with some reflections on the research process. Chapter four presents key findings and an analysis of themes emerging from the interviews. Chapter five discusses relevant conclusions that can be drawn from key findings, suggesting new theoretical insights. It then considers the relevance and implications of the findings for my own professional practice and more generally, makes some recommendations for WP practice, links key findings back to the research questions, and concludes with some final thoughts and reflections.

# CHAPTER TWO

## 2. Contextualising the study and surveying the field

In this chapter, I illustrate the conceptual framework underpinning this IFS and make explicit the personal and professional context of my interest in researching WP. A selective review and analysis of policy texts and studies investigating post-compulsory education and career decision-making is undertaken and further gaps in WP research are illustrated by drawing upon a major review of related research.

## 2.1 Conceptual framework

As was mentioned in chapter one, my interest in researching WP is linked to a personal and professional concern about the reproductive nature of HE and a commitment to social justice. Theoretical ideas developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990 and 1993) are pertinent to this concern. Bourdieu's work, through a critical analysis of class relations, provides one possible explanation for why social advantage and disadvantage are maintained among different social classes. He saw the  education system as a hidden structure manipulated by the powerful to reproduce the overall society and described the social processes by which minority elites shape society and are advantaged in the process and, thus, perpetuate their own interests by referring to the term 'habitus'.  Bourdieu described 'habitus', which takes different forms (e.g. individual, familial and institutional), as 'a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations' and 'as a power of adaptation which produces actions' (1993: 78). Bourdieu (1977, 1990 and 1993) also refers to 'field' as a set of positions and relationships which are 'defined by the possession an interaction of different amounts of economic, social and cultural capital' (Hodkinson and James, 2003: 394). Bourdieu (1990) argued that, whilst adaptation occasionally takes the form of radical conversion (notions of agency), social forces such as 'habitus' and capital accumulation generally tend to be reproductive rather than transformative.  Hodkinson and James (2003: 394) argue that 'habitus and field mutually constitute a point of significance for the way that actions of tutors, students and institutions are studied and understood', and that learning depends upon

the complex interaction between students' positions, dispositions and actions, which are influenced by their previous life histories, as is also the case for college tutors.

### The relationship of existing knowledge to my study

My study built upon Bourdieu's class-based reproduction thesis and the work of others (see Edwards, 1993; Skeggs, 1997; Reay et al., 2001a and Reay et al., 2002) by also investigating issues related to gender and race *vis-à-vis* post-compulsory education and 'caring' career choices. It also develops conceptual ideas initially identified by Hodkinson et al. (1996) who extend notions of structure and agency by suggesting that individual social action can be shaped by particular '*turning points'* or key events in students' lives (this research is discussed further later in this chapter). In sum, the conceptual framework adopted permitted the 'testing out' of previously unsubstantiated personal concerns and professional assumptions and provided a valuable reflective tool when considering the findings from this IFS and their implications for my own practice and that of my HEI. For example, is sufficient action being taken to promote social justice for 'non-traditional' students and what additional support strategies could be put in place?

## 2.2 Personal context

My interest in WP has been influenced by personal experiences. I was a 'non-traditional' student myself as I was a mature adult learner who completed an access to social sciences and humanities course in the 1980s. I am also of mixed race ethnic origin (African Caribbean/white) and come from a working class social background. I therefore have some awareness of the opportunities, but also the struggles and challenges that 'non-traditional' students may face when embarking upon post-compulsory education. Indeed, the literature reveals that mature learners, particularly women, but also sometimes men, often have to juggle several competing demands and constraints, for example, family commitments, low paid and/or part-time work, time poverty and low self-confidence associated with negative experiences of schooling and previous educational under-achievement (Edwards, 1993; NCIHE, 1997; Reay, 2002).

## 2.3 Professional context and concerns

WP policy and practice relates to a key aspect of my work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at a post-1992 university. I was the Social Work Admissions Tutor for five years. This entailed selecting students for the BA and MA social work programmes, and implementing both national WP policy objectives and my own university's WP strategy through, for example, work with local colleges to support adult learners' access to HE. I continue to undertake WP work with colleges and from these professional experiences am aware that 'non-traditional' students face key challenges and barriers when applying for social work training at both my own and other HEIs. Some of the potential barriers to HE entry are illustrated in the following sections.

### *Competition and credentialism*

My professional observations are that WP and the marketisation of HE per se have led to increased demand for university places and, in some areas, fierce competition for places. Hence, whilst WP and the 'massification' of HE may have had benefits for some non-traditional students, it may have created additional barriers for others (Morley, 1999). Consequently, it could be argued that whilst 'mass HE is an inherently democratic concept, in the current context, [for some], it is the democracy of the marketplace' (Harrison, 1994 cited by Morley, 1999: 32). To support these contentions and to provide further contextualisation to my own professional concerns, within my own department, demand for places by far exceeds supply *vis-à-vis* agreed targets. The number of applications for the BA Social Work has more than trebled in recent years (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005). To illustrate, in one year, applications rose by 42% between January 2004/2005. Indeed, the ratio of applications to entrants was 1:44 for the academic year 2005, 752 applicants applied for eighteen places (Dillon, 2004b). In a context of high demand and intense competition for places my professional concern is that 'non-traditional' students per se, but particularly 'access to social work' students' admission to HE may actually be inhibited. This situation has arguably been compounded by the introduction of a new three year qualifying degree in social work in 2003, which all HEIs in England were required to implement. The entry requirements for this degree are more stringent than the previous two year diploma in social work; all entrants to social work education must now demonstrate key skills in mathematics and English equivalent to GCSE grade C or above (DH, 2002). At my own HEI,

whilst not necessarily required to have qualifications in mathematics and English, it is obligatory for all candidates to undertake a written test and a mathematics test. These tests are administered under examination conditions and used to determine whether the aforementioned GCSE standards are met. The written test is also used to assess suitability for social work, as is a one-to-one interview that candidates undergo.

### *Problems with key skills development*

Problems with literacy are the most common reason for applicants being rejected by the social work programme at my HEI. To illustrate, for the academic year 2004/2005, 968 applications were received for the BA Social Work and 649 (67%) applications were rejected at the application stage (Dillon, 2005). The key reason was problems with literacy identified on the personal statements of UCAS applications (op site). Issues with literacy, and to a much lesser extent mathematics, were also a key reason for candidates being rejected at the selection stage (Dillon, 2005). Of the 319 candidates that sat the entrance tests for the academic year 2004/2005, 147 (46%) failed the written test, and 17 (7%) failed the mathematics test (*op cit*). Previous research that I conducted suggests that problems with basis skills may be a particular issue among 'non-traditional' students (Dillon, 2007). An analysis of applications over a four year period revealed that those from students on 'access to social work' courses at particular FE colleges were frequently characterised by poor supporting personal statements and unsatisfactory levels of literacy (ibid.) However, problems with basic key skills are also a broader issue which is reflected in national GCSE achievement levels. Only 40% of pupils at the age of 16 achieved A-C grades in English, and only 33% in mathematics (DfES, 2007). Moreover, only 40% reached this standard in mathematics *and* English (op cit).

### 2.4 Historical barriers to HE participation

The literature reveals an enduring problem of differential rates of HE participation among particular socio-economic groups and related concerns are raised in the following reports that are reviewed here (see the Robbins Report, 1963; the Dearing Report, 1997 and DfES, 2003a and 2003b). Findings from these reports have acted as both a catalyst and a key policy driver to WP and for further research in this area.

### *The Robbins Report*

The Robbins Committee (1963) reviewed the size of full-time HE and patterns and changes in student recruitment and was the first official report to identify 'the historical dominance of higher education by better-off socio-economic groups' (Archer et al., 2003: 5 and 37). Whilst Robbins noted the eightfold increase in the numbers entering HE between 1900 and 1962 (an increase from 25,000 to 200,016), it illustrated that the main beneficiaries of HE were young, white men from the higher professional social classes (*ibid*.). Moreover, Robbins noted that gender and class inequalities in HE participation rates were widespread despite the considerable expansion that had taken place (Robbins, 1963). Whilst this report provided empirical evidence on differential participation rates among particular socio-economic groups, explanations for the prevalence of these inequalities were restricted by incomplete data sets and a lack of qualitative research at the time the Robbins committee reported.

### *The Dearing Report*

The Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) noted that although participation rates had improved among women, they were concentrated within particular subject areas such as education and humanities. They were also more likely than men to enter university through access routes (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997). Whilst there had been improvements in participation rates among minority ethnic populations, Dearing reported both an over and under-representation in this area (NCIHE, 1997). Black African students were over-represented, whilst black Caribbean students were under-represented. However, there was a general over-representation of students from minority ethnic backgrounds in post-1992 universities (*ibid.*). In terms of social class, Dearing reported persistent low participation rates among men from low income/working class origins. This is an enduring problem, highlighted more recently in the 2003 HE White paper (DfES, 2003a).

The findings from both the Robbins and Dearing reports illustrate the continual social reproductive nature of HE and have particular resonance for my study. There is an over-representation of 'non-traditional' students within particular vocational subject areas in HE, for example, social work and nursing (Jones, 2006). These students are predominantly women

(Perry and Cree, 2003) and a high percentage of applicants to my HEI, a post-1992 university, are from minority ethnic backgrounds (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005).

### *The 2003 Higher Education White Paper*

The Government's HE White Paper (2003), *The Future of Higher Education*, acknowledged improvements since the Robbins and Dearing reports, indicating that the overall participation rate for students under 21 had increased from 6% in the early 1960s to around 43% in 1993 (DfESa, 2003: 2). The number of mature students entering HE had also increased (*ibid.*). However the social class gap was noted to still be 'unacceptably high' and to have actually widened (DfESa, 2003: 17). Whilst such inequalities are considered to be both unjust and deep-routed, the assumption in both the White Paper and the accompanying WP document (DfESb, 2003) was that setting a 50% target to increase participation for young people aged 18-30, additional funding, aim higher initiatives and the introduction of foundation degrees with a vocational emphasis would improve the situation.  Moreover, the White Paper still considered the 'A' level route to be the gold standard route to HE for some students, whilst appearing to be endorsing vocationally based two year foundation degrees for other students:

> ….. we do not believe that expansion should mean 'more of the same'. There is a danger of higher education becoming an automatic step in the chain of education – almost a third stage of compulsory schooling. We do not favour expansion on the single template of the traditional three year honours degree. We want to see expansion in two-year, work-focused foundation degrees; and in mature students in the workforce developing their skills. As we do this, we will maintain the quality standards required for access to university, both safeguarding the standards of traditional honours degrees and promoting a step-change in the quality and reputation of work-focused courses (DfESa, 2003:64).

It would seem the academic/vocational divide identified in the literature (Wolf, 2002; Archer et al., 2003) is, paradoxically, reinforced in the White Paper, and as Leathwood and O'Connor point out, like several other preceding policy texts this documents appears to construct academic ability as:

….. inherently fixed and differently distributed […] and presumes the working classes as naturally practical, good with their hands and ideally suited to 2-year foundations degrees (in new universities and further education colleges) – leaving the 3-year degrees (and the elite institutions) primarily for the middle classes (2003: 613).

Such ideas are counterproductive to WP and may reinforce differential participation rates among particular socio-economic groups. This contention is supported by a recent report by HEFCE, illustrating that students on vocational routes 'do not progress to HE at the same high rate as learners with A-level: 50% of young people with vocational qualifications at level three progress to higher education compared to a figure of around 90% for those with traditional academic A-levels' (HEFCE 2006: 72).

### *The Higher Education Funding Council's Perspective*

Watson (2006: 3), in a discussion paper written for HEFCE, points out that despite consecutive WP policy initiatives 'there is a growing gulf between a successful majority and a disengaged minority'. HEFCE, in a recent review of the progress of WP, expressed disquiet about this persistent trend and its concern that:

…… progress in widening participation to higher education may have stalled. These concerns followed publication of the provisional higher education initial participation rate (HEIPR) for 2004-05 in April 2006, and the HE performance indicators for 2004-05 in July (HEFCE, 2006: 2).

Whilst the Council notes the progress HEIs have made in embedding WP as a core part of their mission, it suggests more needs to done to encourage access and progression for vocational learners and stresses the importance of HEIs, schools and college working together in a sustained way.  However, evidence of this kind of working seems to be inconsistent and patchy:

Only about 40 per cent of institutions indicated in questionnaire responses that their relationships with schools and colleges had moved beyond the offer of participation in HEI activities to more regular liaison and contact with senior staff (HEFCE, 2006: 4).

Given the concerns raised by HEFCE, my study provided the opportunity to identify further ways of supporting 'access to social work' students' entry to HE.

## 2.5 The construction of 'non-traditional' students

Analysis of the language used in policy provides a mechanism for tracing its discursive origins and possibilities (Ball, 1994), and its impact on how particular students are depicted. In key WP policy texts 'non-traditional' students have variously been referred to as 'alternative' students (Dearing Report), as following 'the third route' (DES, 1987), or more recently as 'disadvantaged' or 'non-traditional' (DfES, 2003a). William Ryan in his classic book '*Blaming the Victim'* (1971) provides some powerful insights into how different groups in society become initially labeled and then constructed as a social problem. Ryan describes how 'blaming the victim' initially entails separating out a group as problematic and defining them as special and as different from the population in general, and then endeavouring to correct these deficiencies, or attempting to change the victim through, for example, compensatory education (*ibid.*). Ryan (1971) goes on to argue that such social processes are premised on pre-determined middle class educational norms and assumptions about a standard 'achievement motivation', which is taken as a 'given' and not questioned.

Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) research suggests a link between education decision-making and particular biographies. She uses the example of the 'normal biography' to describe the linear, anticipated, predictive and unreflexive choices of particular students. For example, students who have followed the traditional 'A' level route into HE because that is what their parents did and/or expected of them. Decision-making in this context is based on prior socialisation and perhaps an uncritical adherence to doing what one parents' expect, which may also extend to particular career choices, for example, becoming a doctor or a lawyer. Conversely, 'choice biographies' are identified by Du Bois-Reymond (1998) as relating to dichotomous tensions between options/freedom and legitimation/coercion. Examples are where students reflect upon what they want to do and are not sure if HE is for them, but are torn between doing what they want and what is expected of them. Du Bois-Reymond's work suggests that students may

exercise agency in different ways through, for example, ambivalence or, indeed, through resisting parental pressures to pursue HE.

Some useful conjectures can be drawn from Du Bois-Reymond's research in terms of how particular groups of students become initially constructed and reconstructed in policy discourse. For example, students with 'normal biographies' are commonly seen as the archetypal model and as the preferred education trajectory by government. Du Bois-Reymond's idea of students following the 'choice biography' might also explain why a proportion of students start post-compulsory education, change course, or drop out. However, Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) research does not adequately reflect the constrained context in which HE choices may be made, or specifically address social disadvantages linked to race and class, for example. Nevertheless, assumptions underlying WP policy, which consider that the majority of students follow a 'normal biography', are problematic on a number of counts. First, this discourse does not necessarily reflect the education trajectories of 'non-traditional' students; indeed, there may be a multiplicity of reasons why and when students choose to participate in HE – or indeed not to participate. Second, limited consideration seems to be given to the possibility that students referred to as 'alternative students' or 'disadvantaged' may object to being referred to as such, or may consider such descriptions to be inaccurate, patronising and demeaning. Such characterisations are also unjust because research indicates that once enrolled in HE access students 'do as well as peers who have entered via more traditional routes' (Gorard et al., 2006: 37). Finally, in singling out particular groups of students, WP policy is in danger of re-constructing existing educational inequalities (Leathwood and O'Connor, 2003).

## 2.6 Post-compulsory education choices

A growing body of research has investigated HE participation and non-participation decision making and related factors (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Moogan et al., 1999; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Watt and Paterson, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Gayle et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2002; Burke, 2002, 2005 and 2006; Marks et al., 2003). Analysis of these studies reveals that social class, gender, parents and parents' previous educational achievements are key influential factors on HE participation. Other studies (see Britton and Baxter, 1999; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Burke, 2002, 2005 and 2006) explored factors related to issues of identity and illuminate,

for example, transformatory processes that can take place despite students' previous educational under-achievement.

However, only a small body of work appears to have focused on access students' decision-making (see Reay et al., 2002; Burke, 2002, 2005 and 2006). Reay et al's (2002) qualitative study investigated the HE choices of mature access students. Findings from this study confirm the challenges and struggles incumbent in the journey to HE and associated structural barriers linked to socio-economic disadvantage, for example, low income and time poverty (ibid.). However, these constraints were often outweighed by the intrinsic rewards attributed to post-compulsory education, for example, personal growth (Reay et al., 2002). This study therefore emphasises the key role of agency in HE decision-making. Less evident is research exploring 'access to social work' students experiences, with the exception of Jones (2006) study which tracked a sample of social work students from FE into HE and explored their learning and teaching experiences. Whilst this study explored the benefits of this particular vocational route to HE (e.g. confidence building), it did not focus on the challenges and barriers that 'access to social work' students' may experience when endeavouring to make the transition to HE. Neither did it focus on the key influences on the post-compulsory education and career choices of students. Moreover, a less in-depth focus group methodology was used rather than semi-structured interviews, as was the case for my study.

Few studies, with the exception of Hodkinson et al. (1996), appear to have investigated particular '*turning points'* influencing education or career decision-making. This study focused on young people embarking on vocational training schemes and also explored career decision-making and associated socio-economic factors linked to social class. It explored theoretical concepts associated with structure and agency, suggesting that education and career decisions can be influenced by particular '*turning points*', which can be *structural*, *self-initiated* or *forced* (ibid.). Structural *'turning points'* include non-participation in education because of socio-economic disadvantage, for example. Self-initiated *'turning points'* are where the individual is responsible, or self-determining in transforming their lives through, for example, education. Forced *'turning points'* are the result of external events; for example, an accident or bereavement which might prevent a student from entering, or completing an education course. Whilst this study interviewed other key stakeholders (e.g. parents and employers), the sample

of ten young people indicates that sufficiently rich data can be wielded from small studies such as my own, which involved semi-structured interviews with seven students.

## 2.7 'Caring' routes to Higher Education

The final area of investigation of this IFS related to a professional curiosity to explore why students pursue particular 'caring' routes to HE. Only a limited number of studies appear to have explored this theme (see Skeggs, 1997; Colley et al., 2003). Skeggs' (1997) research involved a longitudinal ethnographic study over twelve years and investigated the experiences of eighty three white, working class women initially enrolled on FE caring courses. She outlined how the positioning of the women in the study was influenced by subjective constructions of how 'caring' is considered to be feminine, and how the women reconstructed the 'caring self' as practical and not academic (ibid). A central conclusion of this study is that notions of 'caring' and 'caring' courses are classed and gendered and associated with limited economic and cultural capital and lower-status education and career trajectories.

Colley et al's (2003) research builds upon and extends ideas developed by Skeggs (1997) by exploring how learning cultures can influence identify formation and particular dispositions. Whilst this study recognises that the latter can be influenced by predispositions related to gender, family background and prior related inequalities, it concludes that notions of 'caring' required in the 'caring' workforce are developed, reinforced and ultimately transmitted through the learning context. This process is described as 'vocational habitus', a process by which 'acceptable' modes of behaviour and values result in the inculcation of students having a 'sense' of how to be and the characteristics deemed necessary for 'caring' roles. This includes the requisite feelings and morals, and the capacity for emotional labour (Colley et al., 2003). Key conclusions drawn from this study are that gender assumptions about 'caring' can be reinforced in the learning context. Moreover, existing social inequalities may be reinforced in the process through students on 'caring' courses being further socialised into having what I will term limited '*horizons of opportunities'* and what may result in what Bates and Riseborough (1993) refer to as lower status career trajectories linked to disadvantages over the life course, for example, fewer resources, less educational opportunities. I was therefore interested to explore whether as is inferred by Skeggs (1997) and Colley et al. (2003) this is the case and whether

such dynamics, as Gorad and Rees's (2002) suggest, may be part of a subjective awareness of the limited opportunities that students consider are open to them.

The studies illustrated here make a useful contribution to the literature, suggesting that inequalities can be reinforced through social background (i.e. pre-existing structural inequalities can influence students' course choice), and that 'caring' identities can be further imbibed within the learning context. However, Skegg's study was conducted ten years ago and the 'social care' field has changed significantly since then. Moreover, there are alternative perspectives to how Colley et al. (2003) perceive 'caring roles', and to their contention that 'caring' identities are reinforced within the learning context and, thus ultimately perpetuate social disadvantage. Jobs within the care sector now have more status and recognition than was previously the case. The Care Standards Act (2000) and 'Skills for Care', the employment-led strategic body for workforce development in social care, have introduced national occupational standards requiring social care workers to undertake a minimum level of training, leading to relevant qualifications, for example, NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) (Skills for Care, 2007). As a consequence of this accreditation of skills, the status of social care workers has increased and there is now more scope for career development, for example, work-based qualifications which can provide the pre-requisite academic entry requirements for HE.

This shift to enhanced skills accreditation and increased professional recognition is also apparent within social work, reflected in the shift to a graduate based profession. As was mentioned previously, a degree in social work replaced the diploma in social work in 2003 and new national occupational standards and codes of practice for employees and employers have also been introduced (GSCC, 2002a; GSCC, 2002b; GSCC, 2003). Further, all qualifying and qualified social workers now have to be licensed to practice and to undertake a minimum requirement of fifteen days professional development/training between each three year period of registration. Nevertheless, whilst social work has become more professionalised it remains a highly gendered profession which has historically has been accorded much lower status and remuneration than professions such as law and medicine, (Jones, 2006; Hussain et al., 2007).

## 2.8 Reviewing widening participation research

A major review of WP research commissioned by HEFCE highlights the varied barriers to HE faced by potential and actual students.  Key conclusions drawn from this review were that:

> …… the determinants of participation and non-participation are long-term. There is a clear pattern of typical learning 'trajectories' which are both shaped by, and constrain, learning experiences. Thus, the key social determinants predicating lifelong participation in learning involve, time, place, gender, family and initial schooling. Such findings emphasise the importance of reviewing evidence on participation through the 'life course' of each individual….. (Gorard et al., 2006: 5).

Gorard et al. (2006), whilst recognising the contributions of research linking participation issues with social determinants, emphasise the need for more longitudinal studies following research participants up at different stages of the life cycle. Unfortunately, the educational doctorate does not permit this kind of investigation. However, the average age of the seven participants of my study was thirty four, hence, from a life course perspective they could reasonably be expected to have had a variety of different experiences influencing their post-compulsory education and career decision-making.

Gorard et al. (2006: 5) also note that the 'limitations in the available [WP] datasets encourage analysts to focus on new, young and full-time students and ignore non-participants completely'. Fortunately, my study focused on mature students who had not yet entered HE and investigated the concept of choice, or lack of choice around HE participation.  Hence, whilst my study explored enabling factors, it also implicitly explored barriers to HE participation. Gorard et al. (2006: 5) identify a body of research focusing on three types of barriers to HE participation: *situational barriers* (e.g. individual circumstances), *institutional barriers* (e.g. admissions procedures) and *dispositional barriers* (e.g. an individual's motivation and attitudes to learning). In this IFS, I was particularly interested in exploring *situational and institutional barriers* with a view to recommending within my own professional practice how these barriers could be overcome. It is, however, recognised that my study focused on students already on an educational trajectory; it can therefore be anticipated that the majority of the participants will continue their post-compulsory education. Indeed research conducted by Tuijnman (1991)

confirms this contention, suggesting that the best single predictor of later engagement in education and training is earlier participation. Hence, a limitation of my study is that it did not target students not in education, perhaps due to disaffection or deeply embedded social inequalities.

Gorard et al. (2006: 30) point out that 'surprisingly few studies […] have attempted to draw a link between social background characteristics and aspirations to participate in post-compulsory education'. My study attempted to address this gap by initially requesting that all students on the two 'access to social work' courses at the participating college complete a social background questionnaire. Related factors were also explored further through semi-structured interviews. In sum, although there is a growing literature in the areas identified in this chapter, very few studies appear to have explored post-compulsory education and career related decision-making processes simultaneously, or linked these to the influence of social background factors. In researching the aforementioned areas and issues identified, my study sought to explore some of the barriers to HE participation, to deconstruct some of the assumptions made about 'non-traditional' students in policy discourse, and to identify key influences on participants' post-compulsory education and career decision-making.

# CHAPTER THREE

## 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research questions and the methodology employed for this IFS. It also discusses ethics, identifies the field of enquiry and provides details about the participants of my study. Sampling, how access was negotiated and my position as a researcher are also discussed, as are methods used for data collection and analysis. The value of the study is asserted and this chapter concludes with some reflections on the research process.

## 3.1 Research questions

The following research questions were postulated:

1. *Are the post-compulsory education decisions that 'access to social work' students make influenced by particular 'turning points'?*

2. *Why do such students' choose 'caring' routes to HE?*

3. *Are there any interconnections between 'turning points' and the pursuit of 'caring' routes to HE?*

4. *How do 'non-traditional' students consider they are depicted in widening participation policy discourse and more generally?*

## 3.2 Methodological orientation

The methodology and my epistemological position were influenced by two traditions of inquiry. Firstly, an iterative (hermeneutics) inquiry underpinned by phenomenology. Second, an investigative (semiotic) inquiry influenced by post-structuralism and critical realism which also embraces phenomenology, but also recognises the contribution of symbolic interactionism (*ibid.*). Ontologically, post-structuralism and critical realism question the dominant social order

and seek to investigate dominant expressions of power with a view to seeking an understanding of the dynamic relationship between meaning, power, identity and subject positions (Lee, 1992; Gewirtz, 1997). A qualitative methodology embracing phenomenology and symbolic interactionism 'attempts to understand the hidden meanings and the essences of an experience together with how participants make sense of these' (Grbich, 2007: 84). Symbolic interactionism in particular recognises that people can be *self-determining* and embraces ideas relating to serendipity, unforeseen consequences of actions and the possibilities of transformation (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Webb and Webb, 2006). It is, however, recognised that qualitative studies such as my own, which entailed interviewing a small relatively homogenous sample of individuals within a particular geographical location, have their limitations *vis-à-vis* the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the wider population.

## 3.3 Research ethics

It was important to go through the appropriate ethical channels to gain ethical approval to undertake my study, and to maintain appropriate professional standards throughout. Ethical approval was granted from the participating college and I gave initial consideration to where I was situated. For example, I was aware of being in 'a dual relationship in the work context' (Institute of Education, 2005: appendix 4) that is both a professional (HE lecturer) and a researcher (doctoral student) at two different HEIs. It was therefore important to uphold the professional and research standards of both institutions I was affiliated with, and those of the FE college where the research for the IFS was undertaken.  It was also vital that I complied with the ethical guidelines appropriate to my discipline (those of the British Educational Research Association, 2004), which emphasises, for example, the importance of gaining participants voluntary and informed consent. In terms of appropriate ethical conduct, Sieber (1993: 14) relates this to 'the application of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful and to be fair'. Hence, it was paramount for me to constantly reflect upon my own ethical conduct and to be reflexive during the research process by frequently considering whether my behaviour was ethically appropriate; whether I was merely serving my own research interests and thus being exploitative of the participants, and in terms

of reciprocity giving something back to the participants. Confidentiality was also an important consideration and entailed not identifying the participating college, students and HEI, and ensuring that all research documents, tapes etc. were securely stored.

## 3.4 The college

My study was based within an FE college that I have close professional links with and regularly visit to undertake WP work. The college is situated within a London borough with a diverse population. The largest ethnic minority groups are Pakistani and African-Caribbean at 8%, 70 different languages are spoken, and the proportion of the population aged between 20 and 35 is higher than the UK average (Council Paper, 2004). The borough has high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and scores above average on the index of multiple deprivation (*ibid.*). The college has successfully offered access to higher education programmes in a wide range of subjects for a number of years. The key objectives of the college's access provision are:

> To address and satisfy the needs of adult learners that have experienced educational disadvantage on the basis of social, cultural or economic factors. Access provision provides individuals within the locality of the college and elsewhere with the opportunity to fulfill their educational potential and their desire to address their need for economic well being, whereby Access is a foundation for progression to Higher Education and a range of employment opportunities within the private and public sectors (College document: Access to HE programme overview document, 2007).

From this excerpt, it is evident that the college has a clear WP agenda and recognises the impact that socio-economic disadvantages can have on students, thus seeing education as a vehicle for better employment opportunities and life chances.

### *Negotiating access*

Initial contact was made with one of the access course tutors at the college whom I had met several times previously when called upon to give presentations to students. This type of contact was preferred over 'cold' contact with the college Principal because I considered it would maximise the probability of the college agreeing to participate in my study. The course

tutor acted as an intermediate, contacting the Principal on my behalf and forwarding email attachments about my research and relevant consent forms. This approach proved successful, as the Principal provided written consent for my research to be undertaken.

## 3.5 The students

### *Negotiating access and situating myself within my research*

Initial contact with the students on the evening 'access to social work' course was made in person in November 2006 after arranging with the course tutor an appropriate date to visit. I relayed to the students that the research entailed completing a social background questionnaire (which the course tutor agreed to distribute and collect), and providing written consent to participate in the research.  During the discussion about my research I made explicit reference to my own positioning, situating myself as someone who, whilst a HE lecturer, had followed a similar education trajectory to them and who had a strong commitment to social justice. This information was shared in the hope that it would make the students feel more comfortable with me and mitigate some of the potential power differentials between us.  Other power issues addressed related to my role as both an insider and outsider researcher i.e. external to the college but with professional links. From my previous Social Work Admissions Tutor role, I was aware that most of the participants would have applied to my own HEI; therefore to minimise the potential for any conflict of interest between my role as researcher and a HE professional, I explained that, whilst I had an in-depth knowledge of admissions procedures, I no longer had overall responsibility for making admission decisions. Having made my position clear I did not foresee any particular ethical issues arising during my research. At this point I did, however, consider that students with unsuccessful applications to my own HEI might be unwilling to participate in my study.

### *Sampling strategy*

Sampling decisions were made to some extent on pragmatic grounds, notably the time required to conduct the interviews and to transcribe and analyse the data.  Because my study was a pilot, eight interviews were considered to be sufficient both generally and in relation to the planned sampling frame. A stratified random sampling strategy using a completed social

background questionnaire as a selection tool was seen as appropriate. This type of sampling 'involves dividing the population into a number of groups or strata where members of a group share particular characteristics', for example, gender, and then random sampling within these strata (Robson, 2002: 262). The plan was to select four men and four female participants and then to proportionally subdivide within this sample on the basis of the age, ethnicity and social class.

To facilitate the planned sampling strategy, the social background questionnaire was originally distributed by the course tutor to the entire cohort of students on the evening 'access to social work' course. However, the distributed questionnaires were initially returned to me uncompleted and had to be redistributed after the Christmas period, when only 15 of the original 37 students remained on the course. Hence, when the questionnaires were redistributed an insufficient number of students (8 students) completed the questionnaire and agreed to be interviewed, three of whom subsequently declined to be interviewed. I therefore had to utilise a planned 'fall back' position of approaching the students on the day time 'access to social work' course. I contacted the relevant course tutor to arrange to visit the students to discuss my research. On this occasion, I described the research in more detail than previously and personally distributed and collected consent forms and the social background questionnaires. This approach proved more successful. Although only twelve students were present during my visit, five students completed the questionnaire, four of whom were subsequently interviewed.  The final sample comprised four participants from the evening course and four from the day course. However, the findings from this IFS are based on the interviews with seven participants because one interview failed to record. My final sample was therefore in a sense, *self-selecting*. Whilst this was far from ideal, unforeseen circumstances (i.e. delays in the completed social background questionnaires being returned to me and high student attrition rates at the point the questionnaires were redistributed), limited the possibility of a more 'representative' sample being achieved.

My planned sampling strategy was also affected by other factors. I was not aware until after ethical consent had been granted that the entire cohort of students on the two 'access to social work' courses were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, a persistent under-representation of men entering social work courses (Perry and Cree, 2003) limited the

possibility of my being able to select four men as originally planned. Therefore, the participation of two men in my study is probably representative of the wider sample population in this area, and the ethnicity of students on the access course is broadly reflective of the diverse local population where the college is based.

### General profile of the students

The following details were extracted from the social background questionnaires completed by the seven participants interviewed, five of whom were women and two men. Their ages ranged from twenty one to forty five, with thirty four being the average age.

### Ethnicity

As stated previously all the participants were from minority ethnic backgrounds:

- 1 black British, African origin
- 3 black African
- 1 African American/Caribbean origin
- 1 mixed race British, black African Caribbean/white
- 1 black African Caribbean.

### Family and work commitments

Of the seven students interviewed, three were married and four were single. Six students had dependants ranging between two months and sixteen years of age.  Two of the three students on the evening access course were working full-time and the other part-time. Two of the four students on the day access course were working part-time and the other two participants were not working. The attendance requirement for the evening access course was three evenings a week and four days a week for the day time course.

### Social and educational background

When asked to describe their social class, seven students described themselves as 'working class, with one stating: '*working class but not common*'. Only one student described himself as 'middle class'. In terms of initial schooling, one student had been privately educated and the remaining seven had gone to state schools. Regarding their academic attainment, five students had some kind of qualification(s), including 'O' levels, GCSEs, an HND and NVQs and two had no formal qualifications. Whilst some participants' parents had pursued post-compulsory

education, only three had gone to university. The majority of the parents' educational and professional backgrounds broadly reflected 'working class' social backgrounds for example, a jeweller, farmer, caterer, secretary, homemaker, engineer, care worker, train driver, carpenter, postman and a building contractor. However, making inferences about social class can be problematic and may distort individual life style choices. Moreover, 'social class' is an ambiguous concept per se and may be understood differently cross-culturally. The following table summaries the details of the students in my study. Pseudonyms are used to preserve confidentiality.

### *Summary of each student's profile*

| Name | Sex | Age | Class | Ethnicity | Qualifications | Status | Employment Status |
|------|-----|-----|-------|-----------|----------------|--------|-------------------|
| Joy | F | 32 | *WC | Black British, African origin | 3 GCSEs – Mathematics (d), English (e) Science (c) & GNVQ intermediate in Hospitality & Catering | single, no dependants | F/T postal worker |
| Samuel | M | 42 | *MC | Black African | No formal qualifications, but had undertaken in-service training in relation to his job | married with 5 children between 8-23 yrs of age | F/T social care worker |
| Precious | F | 40 | WC | Black African | 4 GCSEs – no grades cited; HND in Computing Studies | married with 3 children between 2-15 yrs of age | F/T postal worker |
| Esme | F | 29 | WC | African American/ Caribbean origin | NVQ 2 Business Administration | single with 2 children: 2½ & 9yrs old | gave up work to do the access course |
| Sarah | F | 21 | WC | mixed race British, Caribbean/White origin | 11 GCSEs, including Mathematics and English, from grades B-C | single with 1 child aged 22 months | gave up work to look after her child and to pursue the access course |
| Patience | F | 39 | WC | Black African | NVQ level 1 and 2 in Social Care (private school educated) | married with 2 children: 23mths & 6½ yrs old | switched from F/T to P/T work in social care to pursue the access course |
| Paul | M | 35 | WC | African Caribbean | No formal qualifications | single with 5 children between 2 mths & 15 yrs | switched from F/T to P/T work to pursue the access course |

* working class (WC) middle class (MC)

**3.6 Data collection**

The research tools and techniques used were compatible with the methodological position(s) and the conceptual framework underpinning this IFS and thus enabled me to gain an understanding of participants' experiences and to explore potential issues of social reproduction within particular education systems. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was preferred because this permitted the unraveling of the realties of WP policy as articulated through students' experiences. However, quantitative methods were also used to analyse a social background questionnaire initially distributed to research participants.

*The social background questionnaire*

The social background questionnaire requested information on students' age, gender, marital status, details of dependants, participants' educational background and details of their parents' education and professional backgrounds (see appendix 3). This research tool was used to facilitate the selection of a representative sample for the interviews, to enable relevant follow-up questions to be asked during the interviews and to permit triangulation of the findings. I mentioned earlier that there were initial delays in the completion of the social background questionnaires, which meant that only 15 of the original 37 students remained on the course at the point the questionnaires were completed. The college tutor subsequently informed me that access courses per se, particularly evening courses, have high attrition rates, especially after the Christmas break. One student also informed me that another questionnaire had been distributed at the same time as mine, which probably also had an impact on the response rate.

In hindsight, I should have distributed the social background questionnaires myself and at an earlier point. I learnt from this experience and, as mentioned previously, when I approached the day access course to contribute to my study I ensured that I distributed and collected the completed questionnaires myself. Feedback from the evening access tutor also indicated that some of the students had found the social background questionnaire 'intrusive'. I had assumed that because I had built up a good rapport and explained where I was positioned during my initial visit that the students would feel comfortable in completing the questionnaire. I had also perhaps naively assumed that the students would perceive me as having been '*one of them*', rather than a 'powerful' HE professional, and an 'outsider researcher' not really connected to

them. On reflection, perhaps I should not have distributed the questionnaire, or could have undertaken more groundwork. For example, I could have held a preliminary focus group with students to discuss and agree pertinent research questions and appropriate data collection methods. This would have created a more democratic engagement of the participants during the research process, addressed potential power differentials. It would also have been more faithful to my epistemological and ontological positions.

### The interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as a method of data collection. Because of the delays in the completion of the social background questionnaires the interviews took place at an inopportune time between March and April 2007 when the participants had considerable course work and forthcoming examinations. I therefore acknowledge the participants' generosity in finding time from their busy schedules to contribute to this IFS.   An interview schedule was drafted and piloted during the first interview (see appendix 4). The questions on this schedule were pertinent to my research questions, but follow up questions were added following particular responses to questions and as key themes emerged during the interviews. A series of prompts were also used where participants did not sufficiently address specific questions, and deviation from the interview schedule was permitted as this was considered key to participants being able to both tell and share their stories. This approach facilitated a more thorough investigation of participants' experiences, key influences and underlying motives *vis-à-vis* their education and career choices. Whilst this lack of standardisation can present problems, the emphasis in small qualitative studies such as mine is generally on collecting accounts of phenomena with a view to providing rich descriptions and explanations, whilst quantitative research usually measures responses to standardised questions. Hence, interview methods are useful because the data collected generally conveys depth, diversity, subtlety and complexity, all of which assist with developing explanations (Mason, 2002: 51; Seale, et al., 2007: 9). A quantitative methodology involving a large-scale postal survey, for example, would not have permitted this kind of investigation. It is recognised, however, that caution needs to be applied when interpreting data from small-scale qualitative studies such as mine, especially in relation to the credibility and generalisability of the findings and conclusions and claims made from these (Wellington et al., 2005).

The first interview lasted forty five minutes and the others approximately thirty minutes each. Participants were asked for feedback at the end of each interview which facilitated a refinement of the research questions and reflexivity. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim with the permission of the participants. It became apparent during the interviews that participants wanted to discuss their HE applications with me, especially those who had been rejected by my own HEI. I had to consider whether I was going beyond the bounds of my research by discussing admissions decisions. However, I was mindful of what Richard Titmuss (1971) referred to as the 'gift relationship', which relates to not being solely governed by self-interest principles, but striving to also give something back. I therefore provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their applications with me. For those with unsuccessful applications to my own HEI I looked up the relevant records and provided feedback via email or telephone. There was no conflict of interest or issues of confidentiality in providing this information because applicants are entitled to seek feedback from the HEIs they have applied to (DfES, 2004).

### *Post-interview reflective summaries*

Reflective summaries were completed after each interview and used to record salient points, initial themes, important findings and new theoretical insights (see appendix 5). They were also used to record my own reflections on how I considered each interview had gone, for example, whether participants seem relaxed with me and able to talk freely or seemed inhibited, perhaps because of my professional status. This permitted reflexivity by enabling me to consistently reflect on my own conduct and position as a researcher and where each participant seemed to be positioned.

### 3.7 Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis methods were used to analyse information supplied on the social background questionnaires, including the number of participants from middle class and working class backgrounds and their average age. This data was used to contextualise and inform the interviews and also aided the interpretation and triangulation of the findings. Two main approaches were used to analyse the interview data. The first was influenced by Miles and Huberman (1994). They view analysis as consisting of a concurrent flow of activity involving data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. This includes producing

summaries and abstracts, developing initial codes and categories and memo writing. In terms of data display this entails representing the data in a rigorous and systematic way by, for example, using matrices, charts or tables. Finally, verification entails drawing conclusions about what the data is telling you and what it means in terms of what is emerging from the data and any patterns, regularities and irregularities, for example (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These processes are not necessarily linear; instead they are part of 'a continuous iterative process' (Robson, 2002: 476).

Building upon these techniques, the first stage of analysis entailed re-familiarising myself with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and the reflective summaries completed at the end of each interview.  I also listened to the interview tapes for accuracy and for verification purposes, for example, noting the emphasis in participants' voices in responses to particular questions.  Listening to the tapes proved very useful. I had originally paid someone to do the transcribing; however, when I listened to the tapes myself there were several inaccuracies, partly due to English being a second language for some of the participants, but also due to transcriber error.   I initially tried using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data software package, to map the data, to illustrate categories developed, and to assist with the filtering of recurring themes, patterns and key findings. This software whilst potentially useful for retrieval purposes, was not easy to use. I therefore used Word to compile summaries of findings and tables, using different colour fonts to distinguish between key findings and themes. A series of memos were also written on my thoughts about what was emerging from the data after each reading of the transcripts. Summaries of key findings (drawing upon the interview transcripts, the social background questionnaires, the reflective summaries and the memos) were then written up for each case. Using Labov and Waletzky's (1967) structural model of narrative and their six separate elements of a narrative or story, I sought to illustrate each person's individual story. The six elements extrapolated from the interview data were: '*The abstract*' (summary of the subject matter); '*orientation*' (information about the setting, time, place situation); '*complicating action*' (what actually happened, what happened next); '*evaluation*' (what the event meant to the story teller); '*resolution*' (how it ended), and '*coda*' (returning the perspective to the present).

The use of this technique was justified because it facilitated a more systematic and rigorous analysis of each participant's unique, individual story. It also complemented the more

conventional methods of data analysis used, and was congruent with the life long learning perspective underpinning this IFS.

The second stage of data analysis entailed analysing the findings recorded on the summaries both vertically and horizontally i.e. across and between cases. This involved more memo writing and refining and developing the original themes and categories developed during the first stage of analysis. For verification purposes this also involved going back to the interview transcripts, the reflective summaries and the social background questionnaires and comparing and contrasting these with the categories and themes developed, and relating interpretations and conclusions drawn back to the four main research questions and the literature review. Overall findings were then summarised, described and displayed on tables.

## 3.8 The value of my study

### *Credibility*

Credibility 'refers to the ability to demonstrate that the research was designed in a manner which accurately identified and described the phenomenon to be investigated and calls for detailed specification of the methods used and the justification for their use' (Robson, 2002: 546). Chapter one and two identified the areas of concern and the phenomena to be investigated and the underpinning conceptual framework (Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis). Phenomena to be investigated was operationalised through four main research questions and data collection and analysis methods congruent to these foci, and the latter were clearly described and their use was justified.

### *Triangulation and verification*

I was able to verify the interpretations and the conclusions drawn from the transcripts and confirm key findings by referring back to the reflective summaries completed after each of the interviews and the social background questionnaires. A limitation of my research was not being able to verify my interpretation of the findings from my study with the participants. I had planned to hold a focus group for this purpose; however, the sensitive nature of the information shared with me prohibited this, and because of delays in conducting the interviews I had insufficient time for one-to-one feedback sessions with the participants.

*Falsification*

It was important to search for falsification in relation to any inherent bias in sampling and with regard to the interpretation and presentation of the findings. It could, for example, be suggested that there was a problem with my sample. This was largely made up of students who had been rejected from my own HEI. It could therefore be inferred that perhaps only students who wanted feedback on unsuccessful applications might have agreed to take part in my research, which would suggest my study was biased. However, statistics collected on the outcome of social work applications at my HEI over a number of years (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) suggest this is not the case. Unfortunately, very few students from this particular college are successful in gaining a social work place at my HEI (i.e. one or two per year at the most). Hence, my sample was generally representative of the broader sample population. In terms of the potential for falsification during the process of analysing and interpreting the data, I ensured that explicit reference was made to 'deviant' cases and areas of contention and possible explanations for atypical cases were also illustrated, and are discussed in chapters four and five.

*Internal and external validity*

'Internal validity refers to the ability to produce results that are not simply an artifact of the research design' (Elliot, 2005: 22).  The internal validity of my study was facilitated by giving the participants the opportunity to expand upon the areas covered in the interviews and through the use of narrative techniques. These techniques permitted the students' to tell their own stories and to describe key experiences in their own words; thus mimimising the potential for researcher bias.  External validity relates to 'how far the findings relating to a particular sample can be generalised to apply to a broader population' (Elliot, 2005: 22). It is acknowledged that there are serious limitations in the findings from a small study such as mine being generalised to the wider population, especially as my sample was made up of a relatively homogenous sample of individuals at one particular FE college. However, the value of my study lies in the rich description of phenomena which have not previously been investigated simultaneously, which resulted in findings offering new theoretical insights, and which will hopefully make a contribution to the literature, to my own professional practice and future research for my thesis.

## 3.9 Reflections on the research process

I consider my research was generally well executed. Whilst some unanticipated problems arose when circulating the social background questionnaire, which led me to reflect upon my own ethical conduct and to consider how I might have done things differently, this was a valuable learning experience.  Whilst paying someone to transcribe the interviews saved a lot of time, I learnt the importance of listening to the interview tapes myself for accuracy, especially where English is a second language. It also permitted a re-engagement with the interview data.  The most exacting aspect of the research was the data analysis stage. It was only when faced with the data that I realised that the more conventional techniques that I proposed to use were not sufficient in themselves because they would not have permitted me to sufficiently illustrate the rich stories extrapolated from the interview data; hence, the amalgamations of two different approaches. I did not find Atlas.ti easy to use. I preferred using Word, which enabled me to write memos and to display key themes and findings in colour-coded tables that I could print off and look at repeatedly, thus facilitating a more portable way of engaging with data. By far the most enjoyable aspect of the research was talking to the students. I consider I built up a good rapport with them during the interviews and I feel privileged that they allowed me to enter their personal worlds to share their experiences. I learnt a great deal from these students and I hope that in some small way I was able to give something back.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 4. Results and preliminary analysis of key findings

This chapter discusses the key findings from interviews with seven students on two 'access to social work' courses at an FE college, and from social background questionnaires completed prior to the interviews. Key findings are discussed under the following themes: '*the importance of the 'right' course*', '*the access course as a confirmatory role in decision-making*', '*turning points across the life cycle*', '*underlying motivating factors*', '*barriers to progression*' and '*the situated self within the discourse*'.

## 4.1 The importance of the 'right' course

All the students who participated in my study had engaged in some kind of formal or informal education since their initial schooling, including in service training, NVQs and in one case an HND. Joy and Patience had previously been accepted onto a degree programme. Patience declined to take up the place because on reflection it was not the 'right' course for her. Patience, was a mature learner aged thirty nine, and had also previously started an 'A' level course at a Six Form college, but left after six weeks after feeling out of place among a cohort of mainly much younger students. These same feelings were evoked when she was offered a place on a social work degree within a FE college. The other student, Joy, had previously started a college course in leisure and tourism and a foundation degree in art and design and dropped out from both courses because they were not 'right' for her and because her decision-making had been heavily influenced by her parents, particularly her father who has a degree in accountancy:

> *Those first few courses, I wasn't sure if I wanted to do them. I was just studying because of my parents, I've got African parents. They just force you to study even if you don't know what you want to study, so I was just studying to please my Dad. But now I'm doing something that I actually enjoy doing* (Joy).

Four students in total had dropped out from previous post-compulsory education courses because they were not 'right' for them. These findings indicated that an educational experience that was meaningful was the prime motivator for students continuing with their studies, or embarking on a course at a later point in the life cycle. Moreover, educational choices made on the basis of them being 'right' were very individual and linked to the unique experiences, aspirations and motivations of each of the respective participants.

## 4.2 The access course as a confirmatory role in decision-making

In addition to re-activating an interest in learning per se the access course also stimulated an interest in academic subjects relevant to working with people as the following quote illustrates:

> *The access course has been quite a good 'eye opener' for me, cos there's some subjects like sociology that I've never heard about. Psychology, I've heard about it but I didn't know what it was in depth. I just knew o.k. it's an everyday activity, but now I know what it stands for, which is much better* (Precious).

All the students reported that the access course had developed and improved their basic skills and had generally built confidence in their abilities. Some students' confidence had increased to the extent that they planned to do a postgraduate degree upon completion of their first degree. The course tutors played a key role in building up participants' confidence and in developing their interest in learning. They also provided the students with a realistic picture of social work. Thus, the course tutors played a key confirmatory role in students' education and career decision-making:

> [*The access tutor*] *he put it across positively but he didn't make any secrets about how hard it is and I think the first thing he said is there's no point in getting a fancy car … and the other thing he said is there is no money in social work. The way he put it is like this is not a fancy, glitzy job where you can wear high heels, you know what I mean* [laughs] (Esme).

However, high attrition rates, especially among the evening access cohort (i.e. over 50%), may have confirmed for other students that they were not on the appropriate education and career trajectory. This phenomenon may, however, also be linked to the demands of the access course which is equivalent to 'A' levels but runs over one year as opposed to two years for a typical 'A' level course. This pattern of study was reported as being particularly challenging for evening access course students, all of whom were studying on a part-time basis (i.e. three nights per week) and were working full-time. The students reported that the access course also involved a significant amount of course work and frequent informal and formal examinations. Hence, some students might have left the course because they were simply 'over-stretched' or exhausted from working, studying and perhaps from also looking after children. As the summary of the profile of the participants in chapter three indicates, access students have many competing demands on their time and some students may simply not be able to 'juggle' all these demands and associated pressures. 'Access to social work' courses therefore require a high level of motivation, commitment and determination. Whilst students who remain on the course, such as those in my study, might be characterised as having the latter traits, high attrition rates may also be linked to socio-economic disadvantage, as Joy, one of the evening course students, indicated when asked why she thought so many students had left the course since my initial visit to the college in November 2006:

> *There's a lot of them* [who have dropped out], *two guys really wanted to do the course but they couldn't afford to do it. You know they are working, just about scraping to pay their bills and they are trying to better themselves and also help society, but they can't even afford to go on and to do that. I think they* [the Government] *should help a bit more* (Joy).

**4.3 'Turning points' across the life cycle**

My findings confirmed that the students' post-compulsory education and 'caring' career choices were linked to key '*turning points*' generally initiated by key life experiences and/or cathartic moments. Similar to Hodkinson et al's (1996) study, *'turning points'* were *structural* (linked to socio-economic disadvantage), *self-initiated* (linked to students being self-determining), or *forced* (as a result of external events). For example, when Patience's father died during her last

year of secondary education at a private school, she had to leave school without obtaining any formal qualifications because her mother was unable to continue paying the school fees. This example of a '*forced turning point* happened twenty four years ago when Patience was fifteen years old. In contrast, Sarah, who left school with eleven GCSEs and commenced 'A' levels, dropped out during the first year of study because she wanted to get a job and earn money. Decision-making in this context reflects a *'self-initiated turning point'* (i.e. an exercise of agency), but not a *'structural turning point'* at this stage because - whilst Sarah wished to earn money - at the time of leaving her studies she was living at home and receiving financial support from her parents. However, she subsequently had a child at the age of nineteen which she was supporting on her own, and which prompted her to attempt to secure a better future for herself and her son. Hence, whilst Hodkinson et al's (1996) research suggest *'structural turning points'* are inhibiting events/factors that may prevent students from entering or remaining in education or training, my findings suggest that they may also precipitate the decision to return to education, as the excerpt from the interview with Sarah illustrates:

> *I don't want to be on benefits. People think it's an easy ride having your rent paid and all that kind of thing, but I want security, I want my own house that I am paying for myself. I don't want to just sit back all day and just do nothing. To some people that's fine but I'm… you know educated, motivated to do my education and stuff. I don't want my son to think that's the kind of way to be, you know, just to sit back and let the Government pay. I want him to do the same thing, go through his education and do well. And I did find it a struggle trying to cope, trying to get benefits from anywhere, I'm trying to cope now. Living on benefits is hard whilst still studying and whilst trying to do everything else. It's hard (*Esme).

### Primary and secondary 'turning points'

My findings also indicate that '*turning points"* can be what I will refer to as both *'primary'* and *'secondary'*. Primary *'turning points'* were events that occurred at an earlier point in the life cycle during students' formative years or in early adulthood.   For example, Patience, who was forced to leave school early, provides an example of a *primary turning point*, and Paul, whose education was interrupted because he also had to leave school early to help run his father's business during an economic recession in Jamaica.  These *primary 'turning points'* had a

significant impact on both students' lives, resulting in them leaving school with no formal qualifications and lacking confidence in their ability prior to starting the access course. This finding provides one possible explanation for why some students are initially inhibited from pursuing or completing post-compulsory education.

However, my findings also suggest that education and career decision-making are often more complex and influenced by additional factors which I will term *secondary 'turning points''*. These were generally associated with more cumulative life experiences or events occurring at a later point in the life cycle, and usually represented a stage in students' lives when they had had the opportunity to reflect upon significant experiences and determined what motivated them and what provided them with a sense of satisfaction, for example, voluntary work. These were also points in the students' lives when dissatisfaction was acknowledged and action taken to address this, for example, Joy, Samuel, Precious and Patience were in jobs with no career prospect or outside their desired professional field. The exercise of agency taken to assist these students in realising their ambitions included them seeking career advice, contacting universities for information on the entry requirements for social work training, and enrolling on the 'access to social work' course. *Secondary 'turning points'* were therefore generally found to be 'self-initiated', but as was illustrated earlier, were also sometimes influenced by structural factors.

In general the students' education and career trajectories were found to be influenced by a mixture of *primary* and *secondary 'turning points'*. For example, Paul's initial education had been interrupted by events which were both 'forced' and 'structural' in nature (i.e. due to a recession in Jamaica). However, he also described a cathartic experience a few years later when traveling on a bus in Jamaica. He relayed noticing a severely disabled man sitting on the street in the hot blazing sun trying to sell newspapers, and many people passing this man by without offering to help him. On reflection he had questioned why he had not got off the bus to help this man and attributed this experience, the previous 'forced' and 'structural' *turning points*' and more recent *secondary 'turning points'* (e.g. undertaking voluntary youth work) as key influences on his decision to enrol on the social work access course.

## 4.4 Underlying motivating factors

Key motivating factors that underpinned students' education and career decision-making can be classified into the following distinct categories: '*turning bad experiences into good', 'gradual recognition', 'the philanthropic drive'* and the *'education imperative'.* Whilst the students sometimes fitted into more than one category, the motivation to embark on education *and* to pursue a particular 'caring' career (i.e. social work) was found to be inextricably linked in all but one of the cases. This atypical case is discussed under the *'education imperative'* category.

### *Turning bad experiences into good*

This category relates to students who had experienced particularly traumatic events, resulting in them reflecting and considering what they had learnt and what they could contribute to society as a consequence of the insight and wisdom gained from these difficult experiences. Joy and Esme fitted this category. Joy had spent the first six years of her life in foster care and during adolescence had run away from home, been excluded from school and had got into minor trouble with the police. More recently she had come into contact with social workers through her mother, who is disabled (a positive experience), and her brother who had epilepsy and recently died at the age of forty four (a negative experience). Joy stated that she had now turned her life around and had developed a strong religious faith. She described a key turning point that had occurred two years, which could be described as an epiphany:

> *The Holy Spirit came to me and spoke to me and told me the reason why I was going through those things is to help other people through those things. So that's why I want to be a social worker so that I can help other people and so that I can stop the youth going the way that I could have gone* (Joy).

Previous traumatic events and the insights and wisdom gained from these difficult experiences and what could be described as a cathartic, enlightening moment led Joy to consider her education and career choices. Hence, she was keen to work with young people whom she considered were often misunderstood by older adults. Joy's motivation to *'turn bad experiences into good'* was also influenced by the negative experiences of social workers in relation to her brother. She suggested her brother's death might have been prevented if he had received more

help and services appropriate to his needs. Another key motivating factor related to her wanting to address what she believed was a fundamental imbalance within the social work profession i.e. too many social workers from middle class backgrounds working with clients predominantly from working class social backgrounds. She considered that by entering social work that people similar to herself, from working class backgrounds, would be able to provide a more empathetically sensitive and responsive service to clients.

In contrast, Esme described a happy and stable childhood, during which she had frequently come into contact with social workers because her aunt was a foster carer. However, Esme had experienced severe depression in the past which resulted in her being admitted to a psychiatric unit. This traumatic experience, subsequent voluntary work with young people with learning disabilities, and a growing religious faith influenced her education and career decision-making. She also described having had an epiphany where she considered God had spoken to her, explaining why she had gone through the experiences she had and how she could put these to good use by helping others:

> *To tell you the truth it's … as I've got to this stage now, everything's falling into place. Certain things like in my life are falling into place and now I am like this is what I am supposed to do.  Also I mean, I'm, I am religious and I do feel that at the time of the that I was being forced, like pushed, like something within me like this is what you are supposed to do now, you go and do that and you know cos everything's falling* [into place]*… not everything is easy for me, um but I always manage to get through and understand what I am supposed to understand and I don't know if He's* [God] *helping me* (Esme).

### A gradual recognition

Whilst Esme's account might also be indicative of a more gradual recognition of the desired education and career, it differs from the other three accounts discussed here because it was characterised by a significant traumatic event.  Samuel who was aged forty two came to the UK with his wife eight years ago, leaving his five children in Nigeria to be cared for by relatives, and obtained a job within social care and regularly sent money back home to support his family. This participant's education and career trajectory reflects a gradual recognition of the contribution he

could make to society and a growing frustration that he could not be at the forefront of decision-making *vis-à-vis* his work with disabled clients.  His decision to follow his aspiration to become a qualified social worker followed a process of assimilation and gradually shifting priorities:

> *I'm about eight years in this country and when I got to this country for the first time the first thing that comes to mind is that you've left people back home and you need to care for them. I may be settling down now and I feel my children are growing up as well and I can now relax and think about myself'* (Samuel).

Patience, a mature adult learner aged thirty nine, married with two children, had been working within the field of social care for fifteen years. She came to a gradual recognition that her prospects within her current job and the social care field generally were limited with only NVQs and without a professional qualification:

> *If you look at most of the managers and managing directors in health and social care, most of them didn't have any formal education, but because of NVQs and in service training some of them are managers and directors. I think the disadvantage is when you leave that company it would be difficult for me to be employed somewhere else. I've seen that happen. I saw a job advertised for a home care manager for £32,000 and I knew my manager is earning £24,000, but she does not have a professional qualification* (Patience)*.*

This recognition of limited prospects and a desire to be in a more senior role with key decision-making powers was a prime motivator for Patience embarking upon the access course. She also indicated that the access course had re-evoked earlier ambitions during her initial education at a private school, namely to obtain a degree and to hold a senior post where she was the boss or managing director.

Precious, a mature learner aged forty, married with three children had been working for a post office company for eight years, a job she considered offered no promotion opportunities. She already had an HND in computing studies and had been previously accepted onto a BA social

work course at an FE college, but declined this place because she wanted to develop her basic skills further, did not wish to study among much younger students, and considered studying for a social work degree at a FE college had less status than within a HEI. Precious had undertaken a lot of voluntary work within her local church and, whilst very committed to helping people, also wanted a job that fitted around caring for her children. This account reflected both a gradual recognition and a more 'considered' approach to post-compulsory education and career decision-making because Precious wanted to ensure that she was embarking upon an educational course that was 'right' for her, that she was sufficiently prepared for and which provided flexibility:

> *I can't go anywhere* [in her current job]… *There's no promotion but it's not really what I want with children. I want something I can work round my children and I've said to myself I've had enough now and I've spent eight years in Royal Mail and work in my church, I deal with the elders. And working with the elders in my church I see I can give more and I enjoy doing it* (Precious).

### The philanthropic drive

Whilst most of the students were motivated by altruism to varying degrees, for three this was a particularly strong incentive. Samuel and Paul, the only men in my study, had been influenced by their own fathers' philanthropy. Samuel's father had been a chieftain within his village in Africa:

> *When I was a young boy I grew up to know my dad as a philanthropist within my local community back home in Africa. He kind of supported people around the community because he was a councilor and helped people, especially around big holidays like Christmas and New Years. He would buy gifts and give them to people who did not have enough and as I was growing up I began to copy him* (Samuel).

Paul's father had been a jeweller/watch maker in Jamaica and had offered young men from socially disadvantaged social backgrounds apprenticeships and loans as a route out of the Jamaican ghettos. Neither man appeared motivated by money, status or power. Indeed, Paul had previously rejected the opportunity to emigrate to the USA to set up a potentially lucrative

business. Rather, both men seemed motivated by an almost self-less commitment to wanting to help people and to make a wider contribution to society, as the following excerpt from one of their interviews suggests:

> *That's my aim, my nature, you know it seems a bit ridiculous err a bit far fetched but I just have this thing, sometimes I envision myself as kind of metaphorically having a tool box sometimes you know, I'm going to fix the world* [laughs] (Paul).

Precious (who was also mentioned under another category) was undertaking voluntary work within her local church and providing daily care and support to an elderly neighbour. She traced this caring imperative back to caring for her own grandmother in Africa.

In contrast, Joy and Esme's education and career decision-making, whilst perhaps not as motivated by the *philanthropic drive* as Samuel and Paul, were nevertheless very committed to pursuing 'care' related professions. However, they were distinct from the other students mentioned under this category because their career decision-making had been significantly influenced by family members working within the 'caring' professions, as excerpts from their interviews illustrate:

> *Most of my family has gone into care related professions. My sister is a paediatric nurse. My brother-in-law a mental health nurse, and my niece she also works with psychiatric patients, so I've got all these sort of people around me and I've been geared towards that* ….[laughs] (Joy).

> *My whole family seems to one of like a caring kind. My two aunts were foster caring when I was very small so I've always grown up around children in care. My grandmother was also a nurse; my aunt was also a nurse. My mum wanted to be a social worker, although she remained in administration … I don't know family feel…I always thought this is the kind of way to be* …. (Esme).

### *The education imperative*

Sarah's (the youngest participant) trajectory appears to have been influenced by a strong *'education imperative'*, evidenced by a consistent, albeit interrupted, engagement in education.

For example, Sarah started 'A' levels at a Sixth Form college and then dropped out. She returned to education shortly thereafter to commence a college course, but dropped out after six weeks. She then applied to my own HEI for a place on the social work programme a year ago, and when rejected, because she did not meet the academic entry requirements (two 'A' levels), she subsequently enrolled on the access course to social work. This *'education imperative'* was also motivated by Sarah's enduring interest in academic subjects related to people, for example, psychology and a significant life event (i.e. having a child), but was also the result of strong parental influence. Whilst neither of Sarah's parents was university educated, there appeared to be a strong emphasis on education within her family, as the following quote illustrates:

> *I was always educated… like I was always in education. My parents always forced upon me to be educated, they've sent me to quite a good school as well, so I've never like …it's just that I took a break from education to work because at the time I wanted to have some money, because also I was young, single and I just wanted to earn something for myself before going back to college* (Sarah).

Sarah also differed from the other students in other key ways. There was no evidence of a strong imperative to help people, or wanting to make a particular contribution to society or her chosen career. Neither had Sarah's decision to pursue a 'caring' career been influenced by family or friends. As suggested previously, Sarah appeared largely motivated by an '*education imperative*', and having a child on her own at the age of nineteen.

## 4.5 Barriers to progression

The students experienced several potential or actual barriers when endeavouring to progress to HE, for example, time poverty and financial concerns and were therefore generally 'juggling' several competing demands. For example, working full or part-time whilst studying, and in the case of some, also caring for children. Some of the students were making considerable sacrifices to achieve their aims. For example, Joy had sold her car because she was no longer able to do overtime at work and was could therefore not afford the running costs of a car.

Another major barrier related to students gaining access to a HE social work programme. At the time of the interviews, only Sarah (the youngest student with eleven GCSEs) had managed to secure a place on a social work programme at the university of her choice (at my own HEI, a post-1992 university). The other students' applications to my own and other HEIs had been unsuccessful due to problems with literacy or insufficient demonstration of suitability for social work. Patience indicated that one HEI did not seem to recognise that the access course focused on key skills development in mathematics and English, and still expected students to have GCSEs in these subjects, which several of the participants did not have. Samuel, who had a strong African accent, had successfully passed both the written and mathematic tests at my own and other universities, but failed group and individual interviews because of problems with verbal communication.

Most of the students who had not secured HE places on social work programmes were considering other possible alternatives options. For example:  Esme had accepted a place at a FE college to do a degree in social work and four of the other students were planning to take longer routes to qualify as a social worker by completing non-vocational degrees and then a two year postgraduate degree in social work; others were planning to put in additional applications to a FE college in another attempt to secure a social work place, and if this failed to contact UCAS with a view to going through clearing.  These findings suggest that the 'institutional barriers', discussed in chapter two, remain a prevailing issue impacting on 'non-traditional' students' progression to HE per se, but especially for those attempting to access HE social work programmes. Whilst 'situational barriers' (Gorard et al., 2006) presented participants with difficulties, for example, managing on a low income, they did not inhibit the students motivation to pursue their education and career goals. However, it is recognised that 'situational barriers' may have been a contributory factor in some students dropping out from the access course, and might provide another explanation for high attrition rates, particularly on the evening course.

## 4.6 The situated self within the discourse

The students demonstrated mixed views of how they considered 'non-traditional' students were depicted within WP policy and more generally.  Four of the students considered they were portrayed positively and saw related initiatives such as access courses as providing opportunities and 'second chances' for 'non-traditional' students such as themselves:

*'I think they* [the Government] *think of them positively … Cos they know if you go out there,… and some of us who are our age we could do better. We are not after the money, we are going out there because we care and we love the community* (Precious).

However, some of the other students considered the way 'non-traditional' students were portrayed was both inaccurate and insulting:

*I think they probably view it as being kind of for some reason they have failed, like they couldn't do their A levels, so they have to now go into* [an] *access course. Why couldn't they go the conventional route and do 'A' levels through that way? But that's not the case at all because in my class there's a lot of people who just choose to go to work and then, you know, they may be 40 years old now they think "I want to change, I want to be a social worker". And maybe like a life event steered them towards social work, and me myself* [influenced by having a child and being on benefits]. '*It's not a walk in the park. I think that gets to me as well, that people think, "oh, was there a reason why you couldn't do 'A' levels?". But there is no 'A' level in social work anyway, so I would rather just get my course in social work so that I know that I am studying in the field I want to be in* (Sarah)*.*

Patience, who was privately educated, expanded upon some of misconceptions held about access students:

*I think some people look down on them because I remember a friend told me that she remembers I was clever when we were at school so why should I go for the access course because access courses are for people who cannot learn. Yeah yeah, people without any secondary school education - people who have just completed elementary or primary school. I found out it's not true* (Patience).

Paul, considered that 'non-traditional' students were both 'undervalued and 'misunderstood' and that the Government failed to recognise that there were different ways of getting educated, instead seeming to 'confuse education with motivation'.

These findings suggest that education and career decisions are often made on a rational choice basis at a point in the life course when it is the 'right' time and the 'right' decision for students, but this is not reflected in WP policy, or more generally in relation to how access students are understood. Moreover, as the above quote from the interview with Sarah illustrates, the decision to enrol on an access rather than an 'A' level course may be made on the grounds of prudence. As Sarah stated 'there is no 'A' level in social work' and the access course takes one year, rather than two years for 'A' levels. It also provides a direct route to HE because most FE colleges have access agreements with partner HEIs, requiring HEIs to provide 'access to social work' students with the opportunity to undertake selection and, if unsuccessful, to offer them a place on an alternative course. Further inferences and conclusions that can be drawn from the findings illustrated here are discussed in chapter five, as is the significance of the findings for my own professional practice.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## 5. Interpretations and conclusions drawn from the findings

This chapter draws key inferences and conclusions from the findings illustrated in chapter four and link the discussion back to the literature review and the conceptual framework underpinning this IFS. It also considers the relevance and implications of the findings for my own professional practice. This IFS concludes by linking key findings back to the research questions, with some recommendations for practice, and some brief final thoughts and reflections.

## 5.1 Discussion and analysis of significant findings

Key findings are analysed in relation to the following themes: '*rational choice decision-making*', '*self-identity and decision-making*', '*the benefits of the longer journey*', *'challenging widening participation policy assumptions',* and '*markets and increased stratification*' and *'in support of the social reproduction thesis?'*.

### Rational choice decision-making

A significant finding from this IFS is that post-compulsory education and career decision-making processes are complex, non linear and unique to the individual in question. This is substantiated by the findings illustrating that several students had prior post-compulsory education experiences, or had shown previous interest in pursuing particular courses, but had either dropped out or declined to take up offers of places. This suggests that whilst engagement in post-compulsory education can be inconsistent, or happen at a later point in the life cycle, that some individuals have an enduring intrinsic drive and motivation to engage in education, but both the time and the course have to be 'right'. Hence, education decision making can be considered to be made on a rational choice basis, often on the grounds of prudence. This suggests that the education trajectories of 'non-traditional' students' need to be seen in a wider context rather than assumptions being made that particular students lack ambition or motivation if they do not participate in HE at a prescribed time.

However, it also recognised that socio-economic factors can also have an impact on education trajectories over the life cycle. For example, the majority of the students in my study were in low income jobs, and some had family obligations which might have previously prohibited them from embarking on post-compulsory education. However, my findings seem to dispute those of Skeggs (1997) and Colley et al. (2003) who suggest caring courses reinforce pre-existing social disadvantage and gender inequalities by socialising 'non-traditional' students into pursuing low status work with limited future prospects. The participants of my study, especially those already working within social care, fully appreciated the limited opportunities within particular 'care' fields and in addition to being motivated by a commitment to 'caring' wanted to increase their economic capital through gaining a social work qualification. They had therefore taken the decision to enrol on the 'access to social work' course to improve their prospects and, if successful, would be entering a profession offering a reasonable salary, with good future career prospects, and good terms and conditions (e.g. generous holidays and a good pension scheme) compared to social care.

### Self-identity and decision-making

My findings illustrate education and career decision-making are marked by key *'turning points'* that can be subdivided into what I termed '*primary* and *secondary 'turning points''*, both of which have a significant impact on the development of individuals' self-identity. Whilst *primary 'turning points'* were significant and sometimes the result of forced or structural factors, it was the more cumulative effects of *secondary 'turning points'* that had an impact on shaping individual identity and 'caring' dispositions, both of which subsequently influenced education and career decision-making. This suggests decision-making in these areas is a highly reflexive process, which challenges the implicitly deterministic inferences made by Colley et al. (2003) that 'caring' choices are non-reflexive and heavily influenced by the learning cultures into which students are socialised. The students in my study were aware that the caring profession they had elected to pursue was not perhaps as well paid as other professions, but this was not the overriding priority. Instead the students were generally motivated by wanting to make a real contribution to society by helping people. The categories developed from the interview data, for example, *'the philanthropic drive'* provide evidence of this motivational drive, and of the gradual development of 'caring' dispositions over the life cycle.

Moreover, whilst the number of men in my study was very small, my findings also challenge some of the gender assumptions made by Skeggs (1997) and Colley et al. (2003) that woman in particular are socialised into pursuing particular 'caring' routes. My findings suggest the men in my study were more motivated than the women to undertake 'caring' roles, albeit with grander ambitions to 'change the world'. However, Sarah's motivation was distinctly different from the other students. Sarah's motivation was influenced by what I referred to as a strong *'education imperative'*, encouraged by her parents. She therefore matched what Du Bois-Reymond's (1998) refers to as the 'normal biography' to describe the linear, anticipated, predictive and unreflexive choices of some students. Whilst Sarah's education trajectory was interrupted, she had always intended returning to post-compulsory education. Her decision-making was also marked by an 'economic imperative' to get off benefits and to support her son, rather than a strong drive to 'help' people. The conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that post-compulsory education and career decision making can be influenced by a variety of different motivational factors and dispositions linked to the development of self-identity over the life course. Hence, with the exception of Sarah, the students who participated in my study do not match descriptions depicted in WP policy, which tends to portray 'non-traditional' students as one homogenous group, and their education trajectories as linear and non-reflexive. Nor does WP policy seem to recongise the influence of key experiences and events on education and career decision-making.

### The benefits of the longer journey

My findings suggest that undertaking post-compulsory education and making career choices at a later point in the life cycle may have intrinsic benefits. Significant experiences generally resulted in students having reached a stage of 'self-actualisation' in their lives, referred to by Maslow (1959) in his theory of human motivation. This process also has a reflexive dimension, suggesting key experiences have a broader significance. For example, experiential learning which takes places on an informal basis in the context of people's lives is an important influence on 'non-traditional' students' education and career decision-making. 'Non-traditional' students are therefore a valuable asset per se, as the following quote aptly illustrates:

> *At the end of the day I think access students are quite valuable kind of people,*
> *because they, most people have already done things, they've already experienced life.*

> *They maybe didn't have a qualification … they've just been away from* [education for a while] *… so when they come they come with a broader mind. That's what I think. You know, access students have even got the edge over some 'A' level students when, you know, they go to university* (Esme).

Therefore, whilst the journey for some 'non-traditional' students may be characterised by considerable struggle and potential obstacles, it is these experiences per se that makes them who they are.   Hence, a central conclusion is that the longer journey often means 'non-traditional' students have potentially more to offer, especially *vis-à-vis* their chosen career paths.

### *Challenging widening participation policy assumptions*

My findings challenge some of the assumptions made in WP policy. Firstly, the complexity of education decision-making is not reflected in the way 'non-traditional' students are depicted in WP policy. Secondly, there is a lack of recognition that education decision-making is a highly reflexive process and that mature 'non-traditional' students, in particular, may not reflect the 'normal biographies' represented as the 'norm' in WP texts (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Thirdly, my findings suggest that students who do not pursue 'A' levels or participate in post-compulsory education after initial schooling may not be disengaged from education, or have necessarily 'failed' in some way. My findings indicate that some students start and drop out of post-compulsory education and others may take a longer time to pursue such options. However, it is also recognised that disaffection may inhibit some students from participating in post-compulsory education, and because of the competitive nature of the labour market this may have adverse socio-economic consequences over the life course. Finally, my findings indicate that the negative portrayal of 'non-traditional' students in WP policy does not seem to have a significant impact on self-identity, or on self-confidence developed during the access course. This is an important positive finding, suggesting that the discursive construction of 'non-traditional' students implicit within WP text does not necessarily have a negative impact on students.

*Markets and increased stratification*

My findings confirm the significant barriers to HE participation for 'non-traditional' students pursuing particular vocational routes highlighted in chapter two. Key barriers relate to extreme competition for places, a situation which has arguably been compounded by marketisation and the 'massification' of HE (Morley, 1999). This increased competition presented a significant 'institutional barrier' (Gorard, et al., 2006) to HE participation for the students in my study. I illustrated in chapter four that only one student, Sarah, who more typically reflected the 'normal biography' illustrated by Du Bois-Reymond (1998), had secured a place on a social work programme, and that was at my own university, a post-1992 HEI.

Problems with basic skills represented another significant barrier to HE participation. Only Sarah had managed to pass selection for entry to a HE social work programme within a HEI. This would appear to support my key professional concerns and those of the Department for Education and Skills, which suggest (as was illustrated in chapter two) that issues with basic skills are a national problem. As a result of 'institutional barriers' and problems with basic skills, several of the students in my study were forced to consider other options, for example, studying for a BA Social Work at an FE college. These findings suggest that issues of stratification and socio-economic disadvantage may actually be compounded for students pursuing particular vocational routes to HE. Whilst the Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) reports and the HE White Paper (2003) illustrated barriers to HE participation and an over-representation of 'non-traditional' students within the post-1992 universities, my findings indicate that some students are not even able to gain access to the newer universities, and consequently have no option but to consider longer routes to achieve their aims. This leads one to question whether HEIs are simply recruiting the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged, those who are atypical of their social group (as was arguably the case with Sarah), or whether HEIs are applying stringent entry requirements as a strategy for dealing with increased demand and competition for places. Whatever the case may be, 'non-traditional' students pursuing social work access routes to HE seem to be doubly disadvantaged in the process.

*In support of the social reproduction thesis?*

The findings from my study seem to support Bourdieu's (1977, 1990 and 1993) social reproduction thesis. Firstly, students on particular vocational routes have a problem accessing

HE, and social reproduction may be further reinforced by HEIs selecting the 'best' applicants. This in turn suggests that HE participation for those pursuing particular vocational routes is increasingly becoming a positional good that only those with sufficient economic, social and cultural capital are able to access. This contention is further evidenced by the social background questionnaires the students completed; most of the students in my study came from working class, non-professional social backgrounds and very few had parents who had gone to university. Although an alternative explanation might be that some students' applications to HE social work programmes were unsuccessful because they were just not equipped because of poor basic skills to study at HE level. Secondly, my findings illustrated the issues that students had in even accessing post-1992 universities, with, as was mentioned earlier, some having to contemplate studying a BA Social Work at an FE college, or longer routes to qualify as a social worker. Such a situation arguably compounds the social disadvantage that 'non-traditional students may experience, especially with the advent of tuition fees. These kinds of issues may also relate to what Bourdieu referred to as 'institutional habitus'. McDonald (1996) aptly summaries the parameters of 'institutional habitus':

> Any conception of institutional habitus would similarly, constitute a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation (*cited* by Reay et al., 2001b: 2).

I noted in chapter three that the college within which the IFS was based was located within a borough with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, which could present challenges for the learning and teaching cultures within colleges, particularly where a significant number of students have underachieved at school. However, 'institutional habitus' is also sometimes associated with tutors having unconscious, lower aspirations for the students that they teach. This proved not to be the case in this instance. My findings suggest that the college tutors had helped to raise students' aspirations, whilst at the same time making them aware of the competition to get onto a HE social work programme and the realities of social work. Finally, my findings illustrate the key role of 'familial habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977: 83). For examples, Sarah, the only student who had managed to secure a HE social work place, had strong endorsement from her family and also had sufficient social and cultural capital i.e. she was aware of what was

required to obtain a HE social work place, whereas the other students had limited capital in these areas and only a partial awareness of what was needed to secure a HE social work place.

## 6.2 The professional relevance and implications of my findings

This IFS illustrates that 'non-traditional' students' education and career trajectories are generally characterised by a high degree of determination and motivation, which needs to be both recognised and valued by HEIs, and which also needs to be more adequately reflected in the tools that HEI social work programmes use to select students. In selecting appropriate students HEIs also need to not only recognise and celebrate the contribution that 'access to social work' students, but also ensure that they are adequately supported. However, by far the biggest challenge for both HEIs and FE colleges relates to overcoming the persistent barriers to participation that 'non-traditional' students pursuing particular vocational routes experience. Whilst it is recognised that issues of increased social reproduction that are demonstrated in my study may partly be the result of the marketisation and 'massification' of HE, it is also an important matter of social justice that needs to be urgently addressed.

## 6.3. Recommendations for practice

Both the findings from this IFS and my professional observations suggest more needs to be done at a strategic and operational level to facilitate 'access to social work' students' progression to HE, and more joined-up thinking and working between HEIs and FE colleges would be a useful starting point. One of the key points observed from conducting this IFS was that the participants generally seemed to have limited knowledge about the entry requirements of different HEI social work programmes, and limited access to key information that might assist their progression to HE, including details about fees and financial help available. This suggests that HEIs also need to consider more practical ways of facilitating 'non-traditional' students' access to HE. The following recommendations are suggested as a way of addressing some of the issues raised from my IFS:

- HEIs and FE colleges to work much more closely together and to draw up an access/progression action plan identifying how existing barriers to HE participation will be addressed.

- Designated people within HEIs and FE colleges with responsibility for taking forward additional WP initiatives and for feeding progress made back to senior managers within their institutions.

- More active involvement of HE professionals in the access course curriculum to ensure that students are not only equipped to pass selection, but sufficiently prepared to study at HE level.

- More active involvement of FE college professionals with HE social work departments to facilitate knowledge of HE student selection procedures, and to ensure that access students' are provided with sufficient information and guidance to facilitate their progression HE.

- More information for HE professionals on access course provision to raise awareness of its equivalence to 'A' levels.

- A designated social work academic within HEIs that 'access to social work' students can contact for advice and guidance.

- HEIs to supply additional information and guidance for access students on the professional and academic entry requirements for social work training.

- Regular scheduled activities (in addition to open days) e.g. workshops within HEIs that access students can attend to help prepare them for student selection.

- Taster days to provide access students with the opportunity to visit HEIs, attend lectures and speak to students already enrolled on HE social work programmes.

- The introduction of a mentoring scheme matching 'access to social work' students with first or second year BA social work students whilst enrolled on the access course and during their first year of the social work degree.

I intend to present an executive summary of this IFS to relevant key people within my own HEI and the FE college where the IFS was based with a view to taking key recommendations forward. I also plan to disseminate my findings more widely through publications in refereed journals and by giving papers at relevant conferences.

## 5.4 Conclusion

In the concluding section of this IFS the research questions are restated and related back to key findings, and some final thoughts and reflections are offered.

***Research question one:***

*Are the post-compulsory education decisions that 'access to social work' students make influenced by particular 'turning points'?*

My findings demonstrated a link between education decision-making and particular *'turning points'* characterised by key experiences and life events, for example, epiphanies. Whilst key *'turning points'* can be *forced, structural* and *self-initiated*, a new theoretical insight is that the cumulative effects of what I termed '*secondary 'turning points''* can have a significant impact on decision-making. My findings confirmed those of Britton and Baxter (1999), Archer and Hutchings (2000) and Burke (2002, 2005 and 2006), that access courses play a key transformatory role in students' lives by developing self-confidence and self-belief. This was evidenced by some of the participants' intentions to undertake postgraduate study after their first degrees. My findings also demonstrated that the 'access to social work' course per se played a key confirmatory role in participants' education and career decision-making.

***Research question two:***

*Why do such students' choose 'caring' routes to HE?*

My findings illustrated that students reasons for choosing 'caring' routes were highly individual and influenced by a number of different factors. A new insight deriving from my study is that underlying motivational factors influencing decision-making can be classified into the following categories: '*turning bad experiences into good', 'gradual recognition'* and *'the philanthropic*

*drive'*. My findings disputed Skeggs' (1997) and Colley et al's. (2003) ideas about the subjective, feminised construction of 'caring' identities being unique to women. The two men in my study were found, if anything, to be more motivated by a 'caring' imperative than the women. My findings also refuted Colley et al's. (2003) and Bates and Riseborough (1993) notion of students being unconsciously socialised into lower status career trajectories, or having limited 'horizons of opportunity'. Whilst participants were generally motivated by wanting to make a contribution to the social work profession, they were also aware of the limited economic capital associated with their current positions and wanted to improve their current financial circumstances by gaining a social work qualification. The students' accounts also indicated they were making positive career choices based on an intrinsic 'vocational calling' which was sometimes influenced by family members working within social care. Essentially my findings illustrated that vocational aims are particularly important for mature students.

**Research question three:**

*Are there any interconnections between 'turning points' and the pursuit of 'caring' routes to HE?*

My findings illustrated that '*turning points'*, characterised by significant experiences, strongly influenced participants' decisions to pursue 'caring' routes to HE. In most cases education and career decision-making were found to be inextricably linked, which is perhaps not surprising given that these students were enrolled on a vocational course. However a minority of students may be more strongly influenced by an *'educational imperative'* rather than a fervent caring drive.

**Research question four:**

*How do 'non-traditional' students consider they are depicted in widening participation policy discourse and more generally?*

My findings suggested a mixed awareness with some of the students considering that they were viewed positively and others suggesting portrayals of 'non-traditional' students were both negative and inaccurate, and treated 'non-traditional' students as one homogenous group. However, negative perceptions did not appear to have any adverse impact on self-identity.

***Final thoughts and reflections***

This IFS enabled me to enter the worlds of a sample of students on two 'access to social work' courses at a FE college in South East England. My findings have been both reassuring and disturbing. As a social work academic it is reassuring to know that students wishing to embark upon a social work degree and a career in this field, one where they will ultimately be working with some of the most vulnerable people in society, are very committed to this area of work and generally demonstrate strong 'caring' dispositions. However, returning to my own value stance, namely, my commitment to social justice, it is concerning to know that the progression for these students is characterised by considerable struggle and barriers, which for some might be insurmountable and for others may limit the educational opportunities open to them. Whilst the recommendations suggested in this IFS may help in some small way, the bigger issues of social reproduction remain, suggesting that HE participation is increasingly a positional rather than a democratic good.

Hence, more needs to be done at a policy level to really address these issues. For example, additional financial support for 'non-traditional' students, including free child care provision for students with dependants, and additional support with basic skills development. The problems with basic skills development is a significant problem, suggesting that policy objectives also need to be directed at primary and secondary schools to ensure that young people are sufficiently literate and numerate by the time they leave school. Nonetheless, it is, important to recognise the key role of agency both in relation to the determination of the students attempting to 'scale the walls' to HE, and *vis-à-vis* the dedicated commitment of college tutors, such as those in my study. It is, however, paramount that all HEI professionals, such as myself, especially those committed to social justice and social inclusion, continually strive to promote these important principles through our own professional practice, and by encouraging other colleagues to also do so.

Conducting this IFS has not only reinforced the importance of valuing and supporting 'non-traditional' students, but also of representing them accurately and celebrating the contribution they can make to different educational settings and within their chosen careers. The students in my study knew they had a 'rocky road' ahead of them, but they were traveling hopefully, and despite the setbacks they had experienced, remained optimistic that they would eventually

achieve their goals. Listening to their accounts and their journeys was fascinating. I also went through my own journey whilst conducting this IFS, a journey of discovery. This included, for example, going through periods of crisis when I was not sure how to analyse the data and to interpret what it was telling me, and then what could be described as epiphanies and associated feelings of elation and relief when things began to fall into place and to finally make sense! At this point I became increasingly more confidence in what the data was telling me, and had a better sense of how to describe the important insights that emerged from my findings. However, some of my findings surprised me, especially the problems with students gaining entry to the post-1992 universities. I was aware of this problem within the context of my own professional practice, but was concerned to discover that this problem was more widespread. I also expected participants to have more of a negative self-image because of the way 'non-traditional' students are sometimes portrayed in WP policy. Despite most of them having been repeatedly rejected by several post-1992 universities, the students in my study had positive self-images and were determined to achieve their goals. Although my sample was very small, I was also surprised that the two men in my study demonstrated such strong 'caring' dispositions, and seemed more motivated to undertake 'caring' roles than the women in my study.

To conclude, undertaking this IFS has been invaluable. It has enabled me to gain a better understanding of 'non-traditional' students who are pursuing particular vocational routes to HE, and has identified possible ways of supporting their access to HE within the context of my own professional practice. It has also helped to develop my research skills. Finally, it has provided me with two possible ideas for the final thesis. One, to deconstruct the notion of 'caring' and 'caring' dispositions further, which was beyond the remit of this IFS, and to extend my exploration of students' motivation for pursing particular 'caring' careers beyond 'access to social work' students. Two, to explore the issue of social reproduction *vis-à-vis* access to HE further by surveying a sample of HEI admission tutors, and by undertaking a comparative investigation of two or more vocational courses that provide routes to HE.

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