The Aspiration Generation. The aspirations and implementation strategies of young Londoners at risk of educational underachievement

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Abstract

Education policy in the United Kingdom has been dominated by a discourse emphasizing the role of individual aspirations and responsibility, while overlooking structural obstacles to positive educational outcomes. In this discourse, young people are expected to become 'intelligent customers' in the education market, capable of making financially sound informed choices regarding their occupational aspirations and educational strategies. At a time when youth transitions are becoming increasingly messy, complex and non-linear, it is more important than ever to identify and understand the processes and mechanisms that can help young people to navigate successfully the period between compulsory education and (stable) employment.

Drawing primarily on Bourdieu's 'analytical toolkit' including the theory of capitals and the concept of illusio, this thesis aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the processes and mechanisms that shape the aspirations of young people, who, at the end of compulsory education, were identified as being at risk of educational underachievement, thus facing particularly difficult transitions to the labour market, further or higher education. It also explores the strategies employed by young people to negotiate risk and opportunity in their transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives.

My doctoral study had a longitudinal qualitative research design. The findings are based on in-depth, semi-structured repeat interviews with 15 young people from London, all between the ages of 16 and 21; from diverse ethnic, migration and educational backgrounds. The 30 interviews were conducted as part of a large, EU-wide project, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (2013-2018), funded by the European Commission.

The thesis contributes to the literature on aspirations and youth transitions through investigating the reproduction of social inequalities in education and during post-school transitions, on the one hand, and young people's agentic potential, on the other. This research provides new insights into the process of constructing aspirations and strategies of implementations, while alternating focus between young people's underlying beliefs, values and attitudes that shape this process, and the opportunity structures of their lives.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ... 3

Acknowledgements ... 4

Table of Contents ... 5

List of Abbreviations ... 9

List of Figures ... 10

List of Tables ... 10

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ... 11

Introduction ... 11

Rationale for this study ... 12

Doing funded research: positioning my doctoral study in the framework of a large international research project ... 16

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe ... 17

The relationship between my doctoral study and the RESL.eu project ... 21

Research questions ... 23

Outline of chapters ... 24

CHAPTER 2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ... 26

Introduction ... 26

Local context: education and youth (un)employment in London ... 26

The policy context ... 33

Defining 'policy' ... 35

Defining the jurisdiction ... 35

Education policy in England: brief historical overview ... 36

State education in England: from the beginnings to the 1990s ... 36

Education, education, education. Changes and trends in English education policy under New Labour ... 39

Conservative-led education policy from 2010 onwards ... 43

The construction of the 'aspiration problem' in the English policy discourse ... 48

Youth transitions in policy ... 52

Career advice ... 52

Vocational education in England ... 53

Reducing NEET figures ... 54

Conclusion ... 55

CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW 57
Introduction 57
Definition of terms: ‘aspirations’, being ‘at-risk’ and ‘youth transition’ 57
Situating the study in contemporary policy and academic debates 59
Aspirations and achievement 62
Aspirations and neoliberal subjectivities 67
Aspirations and capitals 68
Aspirations and *illusio* 72
Conclusion 73
CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY 74
Introduction 74
Research design 74
Research setting 76
Participant sampling strategy 77
Participant selection for the RESL.eu project 78
Recruiting participants for the RESL.eu project 81
Participant selection for my doctoral study 83
Research participants 84
Negotiating the interviews 86
Timeframe of the study 88
Data collection method: repeat interviews with young people 89
Data analysis 93
Data management and preparation for analysis 93
Choosing pseudonyms 94
Data analysis method 95
Ethical considerations 101
Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality 101
The ethics of care 102
Conclusion 103
CHAPTER 5. 15 PORTRAITS - INTERLUDE 105
Introduction 105
Adam 105
Aisha 108

Darius 110
Evie 111
Ezra 113
Flora 115
Greg 117
Hope 120
Hugh 123
James 125
Kurt 128
Maria 130
Mina 132
Reuben 134
Rosie 136
Conclusion 138
CHAPTER 6. DEFINING ASPIRATIONS 140
Introduction: what do young people aspire to? 140
The primacy of educational and occupational aspirations 141
Presenting aspirational identities 144
Expectations, aspirations and dreams 145
'Poverty of aspirations' or 'atmospheric expectations'? 149
A typology of aspirations 150
Developing a typology of aspirations 151
Types of aspirations 153
Linear career aspirations 154
Open career aspirations 156
Tentative career aspirations 158
Alternative visions of the future 163
Conclusion 165
CHAPTER 7. CONSTRUCTING ASPIRATIONS 167
Introduction 167
Methodological considerations 168
Change and continuity over time 170
What motivates young people? 171

Interest in a field, joy and love 172
Altruistic motivations 178
Aptitude, competence, talent 180
Financial motivations 181
Other considerations 185
Where do interests come from? 185
What horizons for action shape young people's aspirations? 187
Financial constraints 187
Illness, disability and learning difficulties 189
Inadequate educational attainment 190
Other constraints 190
Conclusion 191
CHAPTER 8. IMPLEMENTING ASPIRATIONS 193
Introduction 193
Perceptions on transitions 194
Commitment to positivity 194
Belief in ambition and hard work 196
Emphasizing personal agency 198
Awareness of structural constraints 200
Negotiating disadvantaged positions to achieve aspirations 202
Raising academic attainment through using capitals 204
Gaining competitive advantage through investing in employability 210
Accessing the job market through social networks 214
Conclusion 216
CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION 217
Summary of findings 217
Contribution to knowledge 222
Limitations of the study 224
Implications for policy and practice 225
BIBLIOGRAPHY 227
APPENDICES 254

List of Abbreviations

A Level – Advanced Level

BERA - British Education Research Association

BSA – British Sociological Association

BTEC - Business and Technician Education Council, vocational qualifications

DfE – Department for Education

DfES– Department for Education and Skills

EBD - Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

ESL – Early School Leaving

EU – European Union

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

FE – Further Education

HE – Higher Education

IAG – Information, Advice and Guidance

ICT - Information and Communications Technology

ISCED - International Standard Classification of Education

IT – Information Technology

LSYPE - Longitudinal Study of Young People in England

NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training

ONS – Office for National Statistics

RESL.eu – Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

SEN – Special Educational Needs

YMCA - The Young Men's Christian Association

List of Figures

Figure 1. Age profile of London's population 27
Figure 2. Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and Math by region, 2013 28
Figure 3. Unemployment by age and region 29
Figure 4. Youth unemployment levels by age, UK 29
Figure 5. NEET rates for 16-18 year olds: England, end of 2015 30
Figure 6. NEET rates in the UK, 2001-2016 (DfE, 2017a) 31
Figure 7. Proportion of employee jobs paid less than the living wage in 2014, by age groups 32

List of Tables

Table 1. Stages of data collection for the RESL.eu project, interviews with young people.... 79
Table 2. Stages of data collection and participants selection for my doctoral study 84
Table 3. Demographic characteristics of research participants 85
Table 4. NVIVO coding frame 98
Table 5. Participants' education and employment background at the time of the first interview 140
Table 6. Young people's aspirations 142
Table 7. Preliminary aspiration typology 152
Table 8. The timing of interviews 169
Table 9. Change and continuity over time 171

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Over the last two decades, education policy in the United Kingdom has been increasingly dominated by a discourse based on the assumption that a lack of motivation and aspiration are at the root of educational underperformance and subsequent poor transitions from education to employment (Gorard, 2010; Keep and James, 2012, Levin, 2010; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). According to this rationale, young people from lower socio-economic background do not set high enough aspirations in regards to their educational achievement and future occupations, and their 'poverty of aspirations' is, at least partly, the reason for their lower outcomes.

However, academic research has been challenging these assumptions and demonstrating that the causes of underachievement in education are much more complex than this very simplistic explanation would suggest. Similarly, the reasons for youth unemployment and young people becoming NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training, are multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to individualised issues, such as these young people's assumed low ambitions. Many studies have found that the majority of young people do have high aspirations (Sinclair, Kendrick and Scott, 2010), regardless of their socio-economic background (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). It seems that policy discourses on education overlook key obstacles to academic attainment, such as the financial limitations of young people from low-income families; lack of adequate learning provision, and employment opportunities for them, among others (Biggart, 2007, Hayward and Williams, 2011).

In this research study I wanted to explore the educational and occupational aspirations of young people from London, who, at the end of compulsory education were identified as being at risk of educational underachievement. I was also interested in the specific strategies they intended to use in order to achieve their aspirations. The 15 young people who took part in this longitudinal study came from varied ethnic and migration backgrounds, and they followed different educational pathways prior to and during this study. All of them, however, experienced challenges and setbacks during their school career. Based on the academic literature on educational attainment and early school leaving, they were identified as being at theoretical risk of leaving education with low or no qualifications (see Clycq et al., 2014; Clycq et al., 2017; Van Praag et al., 2018). They were between the ages of 16 and 21 at the time of the first interview. Some of them were still in mainstream education at this time, others were

enrolled on different apprenticeship programmes, and some have left school after GCSEs[1] with very low grades.

This study investigated how aspirations are interpreted, constructed, and implemented by young people considered at risk of educational under-attainment and becoming NEET in the current socio-economic climate, with the aim of developing a more holistic understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which social inequalities manifest and reproduce during young people's trajectories et the end and after completing compulsory education.

This introductory chapter starts with the rationale for my doctoral study. Since my research was embedded into a large, EU-funded project, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu), the following section presents an overview of the wider project. Building on that, the next section explains the relationship between my PhD research and the larger RESL.eu project in greater detail, describing how the wider project has impacted on my doctoral study. This section also delineates my specific contribution, in terms of the aims, research questions and design, as well as the findings of my doctoral study; followed by the list of research questions. Then, this chapter ends with a brief outline of each chapter in this thesis.

Rationale for this study

The many incongruities between policy discourses and academic research regarding the nature of young people's aspirations and their role in educational and occupational outcomes presented the '*intellectual problem or paradox'* (Dunleavy, 2003:23) that this study sought to investigate. This research seems very timely: if young people do aspire for good qualifications and jobs – contrary to the official discourse, than the barriers to fulfilling those ambitions must lie somewhere else.

Beyond my intellectual curiosity, there were several other reasons which drew me to this topic. As mentioned, it is a topical issue as the 'aspiration discourse' has been central in policy debates, and it was prevalent at the start of my PhD research (although it has faded somewhat towards the end of my research, becoming incorporated into the discourse about 'resilience', 'character' and 'grit' in education and youth transitions, as it will be discussed in Chapter 2). Furlong (2013) mentions that issues related to youth research are often at the intersection of

[1] The General Certificate for Secondary Education is an academic qualification taken by students aged between 14 and 16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish equivalent is the Standard Grade and Intermediate Exams. The benchmark of satisfactory achievement at the time of my research was 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and Mathematics. In 2016, new accountability measures were introduced.

policy agendas and media concerns, stimulating 'widespread' debates. As he explains: '*there is always a high level of interest in young people when they are perceived to be a problem because their behaviour causes concern to those with power and influence*' (Furlong, 2013:5). In my thesis, I wish to add to the body of research which challenges contemporary policy assumptions about young people, and intends to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the specific challenges they face.

The youth phase is incredibly important, well beyond the policy implications mentioned above. Research demonstrates that issues in this period – be that educational underachievement, periods of being NEET and/ or unemployed, and churning can have long-term consequences for individuals in terms of future job opportunities, their confidence and self-esteem, as well as a range of psycho-social issues, including isolation, crime and poor health (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; France, 2016; Furlong, 2013; Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017; Verbruggen, 2016). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand the processes and mechanisms that can help young people to successfully navigate this period between compulsory education and (stable) employment, at the time when youth transitions become increasingly messy, complex and non-linear. Researching the social and economic changes that affect the young provides an opportunity to glimpse into larger social transformation processes, since these tend to first affect those who enter adulthood at that specific time. And, quoting Wyn and White, I believe that

> '*(it) is important to study youth, because the points where young people engage with the institutions that either promote social justice or entrench social division are significant points of reference for every society. Hence, the study of youth is important as an indicator of the real "costs" and "benefits" of the political and economic systems of each society*.' (Wyn and White, 1997:6)

Throughout this study, while answering the main research questions, I will be exploring how young people, participants to this research, interpret the role of education in their own and their society's lives, how these interpretations are influenced by dominant discourses, and how they impact on aspirations and strategies to achieve them.

It also needs to be explained that my doctoral study was embedded into a large international research project, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu), funded by the European Commission over five years, between 2013 and 2018. During these five years, I worked full time as a research assistant on the project. Thus, in my doctoral study, I was able

to build upon the experience and findings of this extensive, EU-wide project, while carving out and focusing on my own research questions, as it will be further explained in the next sections. As such, the general topics and the methodology of my doctoral study were largely determined by larger project; but I also had the opportunity to choose from a vast amount of data collected through RESL.eu.

And finally, perhaps it is not without interest to explain the personal relevance of the topic of aspirations to my own life, and my long-term fascination and struggle with this concept. For me, at the age of 18, deciding on a university course and a career later on was a long, torturous process, riddled with doubts, regrets, and a paralysing fear of loss. On the one hand, I understood the importance of choice – perhaps even too much. I also knew that choosing a future career is an important part of identity formation: setting the goal of not only a desirable job, but also a future self I wanted to become. One the other hand, I could not escape from the dread that making any choice means accepting loss, as choosing one profession means losing all (or many) other possibilities. I found it hard to let go of the opulence of possibilities for the desolate certainty of one profession. I remember the moment when I found a precise and poetic expression of how I felt, when reading The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, few years later, when I was a Masters student in my early twenties:

> '*I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.*
>
> *From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.*
>
> *I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.*' (Plath, 2005:73)

When reflecting on my struggles with my own aspirations, another quote came to my mind. A Hungarian writer, Antal Szerb, mentioned seeing a gravestone in an English cemetery with this inscription: '*Here lies John Smith. He was born a human, died as a spice merchant'* (quoted by Popper, 1995:181). Paraphrasing Popper, I, too, felt that trading in my original humanity for a job is too high a price to pay (ibid). I can recall my horror when, as a freshly arrived migrant – an au-pair - in London I noticed that in newspapers people's names are always followed by their job title: John Doe, a waiter; Jane Doe, unemployed or perhaps a mother of two. I found this practice especially disconcerting when it referred to someone who had passed away: their existence, their essence, their whole life summed up in one word, their job, or the lack of it, for all eternity. In the public domain, their job(lessness) became their ultimate signifier. I had to experience being a migrant, an Eastern European au-pair in London, to truly comprehend the ultimate symbolic violence committed through the 'aspiration discourse' against those who do not have the opportunity to be 'aspirational': the cleaners, nannies, dust collectors, farmers, factory workers and so on, whose work is fundamental for the upkeep and survival of our society, but who are excluded from claiming 'aspirational', 'moral' value for their work, and therefore their public lives.

So, armed with the hope that years of soul-searching reflections will provide me the much sought after epistemological insight, I decided on investigating young people's decision-making process: how they choose a future job, how they construct their aspirations, what their motivations and influences are, and the main criteria of choice. This being such a difficult process for me, I wanted to gain more understanding into how others deal with this challenge. I remember, when I was 18, I only interpreted career choice from a narrowly individualistic, psychological perspective, as the process of forming my future identity, without any acknowledgement or even awareness of structural constraints. From the vantage point of approximately two decades of dealing with the consequences of (a very exhaustively thought through) 'choice', I was also interested in exploring whether others, current young people are more financially and economically astute.

In the end, the epistemological advantage I hoped for by choosing a topic about a process I had personal experience with, proved illusory: none of the young people participating in this doctoral research had mentioned wrestling with similar dilemmas. Their motivations, ideals and goals, as well as fears and challenges were very different from the ones I had at their age – reflecting the significant impact of contextual and structural factors (socio-economic context, policy discourses, social networks) in identity formation and aspirations. On the other hand, I

could recognise that, although faced with different dilemmas, risks and opportunities, and having access to different ideologies and discursive tools, these young people were searching for a meaningful future just as I was at their age. Tellingly, the most frequent motivation they mentioned was that they wanted to have a job they 'liked', 'enjoyed', and which is 'good for others' too: '*It's also that you enjoy the job and you know that you'll be good at it, and then it's also good for you and other people around you'*, Aisha explained. Kurt said: '*I'll leave work every day knowing that I've helped someone: that reward, that good feeling of just making someone's life better.*' What is considered 'meaningful' though is socially constructed, which might explain their very different approaches to career decision-making. I wanted to explore this process, to investigate what kind of resources and procedures can make it easier and more successful.

Researching the concept of aspirations provides a unique perspective into agentic processes of identity formation, which, however, are embedded into and impacted upon by specific socio-economic contexts, social structures and cultural institutions. Young people's aspirations and their transition from education to employment can play important role in the reproduction of social structures and inequalities. At the same time, aspirations can also become vehicles for social mobility, realised through transition to a job with higher social status than their parents' occupations. As such, the concept of aspirations provides a prism through which both structure and agency can be explored in their complex interplay. Through examining such trajectories, this study intends to explore questions about equity in education and transition to the labour market, as well as personal and structural dimensions of social justice.

Doing funded research: positioning my doctoral study in the framework of a large international research project

As mentioned in the previous sections, the present PhD study was embedded into a larger research project, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL.eu), funded by the European Commission through the Seventh Framework Project (FP7). The next section presents an overview of the RESL.eu project, focusing on the elements of its research designs that had an impact on my doctoral study. Then, the following section outlines the commonalities and differences between RESL.eu and my PhD study, and explains how the latter, while building on the larger project, differs from it in its aims, methods and findings.

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

The project involved nine European countries: Belgium, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Hungary and Austria; and took place between 1 February 2013 and 31 January 2018.

The RESL.eu project aimed to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes that lead to early school leaving (ESL) at structural, institutional and individual level (RESL.eu, 2018). According to the EU definition, the term of ESL refers to young people aged between 18 and 24, who have attained no higher than lower secondary education and who are not currently receiving any education or training (Eurostat, 2013). The RESL.eu project operated with the working definition of ESL as '*all young people who left secondary education without attaining a degree/certificate of upper secondary education or similar, equivalent to an ISCED*[2] *level 3 (2011 ISCED scale)*' (Araújo et al., 2013:18). While the term ESL itself is rarely used in the British policy discourse, the benchmark of satisfactory attainment in England and Wales was defined (at the time of the research) at a comparable level: five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and Mathematics (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015).

By using a mixed method design and collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, RESL.eu aimed to identify and analyse the intervention and compensation measures that succeed in keeping pupils in education or training, in spite of their high theoretical risk of ESL. The RESL.eu project analysed ESL from a holistic perspective, investigating the complex factors that influence ESL at a macro, meso and micro level (RESL.eu, 2018).

In order to collect comparable data across all participating countries, all national research teams worked with the same research design. Seven countries took part in data collection: with the exception of Austria and Hungary, all other countries collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The following paragraphs describe the work completed in the UK, however, all countries followed the same guidelines.

The UK team was comprised of four members, including myself. Over the five years of RESL.eu, I worked as a research assistant on this project in full time capacity, focusing mostly but not exclusively on the qualitative part of the project. As such, I contributed significantly to all stages of the research, including the literature review of relevant topics and concepts,

[2] International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 3 is equivalent to upper secondary education.

designing research instruments, participant selection and recruitment, data collection and analysis, writing up and distributing the findings.

Following the official guidelines, we identified two research areas for RESL.eu based on youth unemployment levels, as well as their ethnic composition: London and the Tyne and Wear Metropolitan County in the North East of England. At the beginning of the fieldwork in 2013, in England, these regions had the highest youth unemployment rates for 16-24 year olds and were among the three highest rates for 18-24 year olds as well[3], suggesting particularly difficult transitions from education to employment. Also, London and Tyne and Wear have very different ethnic profiles and they differ significantly alongside other socio-economic factors such as local employment opportunity structures too. Therefore it was expected that they will provide insights into the mechanisms leading to ESL and becoming NEET or unemployed in two very different socio-economic environments (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015).

Stages of data collections in the RESL.eu project

As mentioned earlier, the RESL.eu project had a mixed method design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data collection consisted of several surveys: a large scale survey of students in secondary schools and further education colleges (Survey A1), a survey of teachers and educational support staff (Survey B), and a follow-up survey of the students from Survey A1 (Survey A2). While my doctoral study followed a qualitative approach and was based on repeat interviews with young people, the data collected through Survey A1 was used to identify a number of participants for my study, as described below.

Survey A1 was conducted between March and July 2014, in secondary schools and further education (FE) colleges in both research areas, among two age cohorts: Year 10 (ages 14-15) and 12 (ages 16-17), or equivalent, in the case of FE colleges. Altogether, more than 3000 young people completed the survey in England, in 17 schools and colleges[4]. The survey questionnaire comprised six sections and 86 questions in total, capturing data on a range of topics from demographic variables to school engagement, social support indicators and aspirations. This survey was used to identify young people who are at a theoretical risk of ESL due to their reported socio-economic background, lack of school engagement and/ or social

[3] According to national unemployment figures, in June-August 2013, the North East had the highest youth unemployment rate in the country: 28.6% for 16-24 year olds and 26.1% for 18-24 year olds. London was the second in the country in the 16-24 age category with 26.5% youth unemployment rate. In addition, London ranked third for the 18-24 year olds with an unemployment rate of 22.9% (ONS, 2013b).

[4] Overall, 19,631 young people completed the survey across the 7 countries.

support (see Kaye et al., 2015). Many interview participants for the RESL.eu project were drawn from this pool of potential ESLs, of which eight were included in my doctoral study[5].

While interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with policy makers in both research areas as part of the RESL.eu policy analysis, the majority of qualitative data was collected through Work Package 4 (WP4): Qualitative Analysis of Early School Leaving and Evaluation of Early School Leaving Measures. The repeat interviews with the 15 young people that were included in my doctoral study were all conducted as part of this work package. Following the RESL.eu project design, this part of data collection (WP4) was conducted only in one research area, in the UK case, London. WP4 had three main aims:

1. 'To gain in-depth insight in the different mechanisms and processes on an individual and institutional level that lead the pupils' decision of ESL.
2. To gain insight in and assess school policies on ESL (intra-muros[6] good practices) and understand the schools' openness to the EU and national policies on ESL.
3. To identify and assess extra-muros[7] good practices for tackling ESL, that is, preventing against or compensating for ESL outside of the school' (Clycq et al, 2014:3).

On the one hand, the project aimed to collect data about factors contributing to ESL at the institutional level. Hence, we focused on various measures and initiatives applied in educational institutions to tackle the problem of ESL and other related issues, such as educational underperformance, behavioural problems, being at risk of becoming NEET, and so on. For this purpose, the project differentiated between so called intra-muros and extra-muros measures. In the UK context, all additional support measures that mainstream secondary schools and FE colleges provided for their students – such as revision classes, extracurricular activities, student support services, career advice, and so on – were classified as intra-muros. Extra-muros measures in the UK were defined as those educational or training provisions that are different from mainstream secondary schools but still provide equivalent qualifications, such as apprenticeship programmes, pre-apprenticeship schemes and bridging courses for young people over 16 who left education with no qualifications. In addition to the institutional

[5] The recruitment strategy for my doctoral study is described in more detail in Chapter 4: Methodology.

[6] Intra-muros were defined '*as those interventions taking place within the school environment. External partners can be involved in these measures, however the measure itself is executed within the school and the pupil is not taken out of the school for a longer period*' (Clycq et al., 2014:4).

[7] Extra-muros measures, on the other hand, were defined as measures implemented outside of mainstream education, in alternative learning arenas (Clycq et al., 2014).

level analysis, the project also aimed to collect individual level data about the educational experiences, trajectories and aspirations of young people at the age of leaving compulsory education.

In order to achieve these aims, qualitative data collection had taken place in several stages over a 2 year period, between November 2014 and October 2016, involving a large number of research participants (see Clycq et al., 2014). Survey A1 provided the baseline for selecting interview participants. From the Year 12 cohort in Survey A1, we identified young people who, by the next academic year, progressed into one of the three categories: stayed in mainstream education, chose an alternative educational or training setting, or became NEET. To boost the numbers in the second two categories, young people who did not take part in Survey A1 were also invited to take part in the RESL.eu project (side-entry participants).

Data collection was structured around the institutional level. First, we concentrated on student support services in mainstream education (intra-muros) alongside young people who stayed in full time education, in sixth forms or FE colleges. Then, our investigation focused on alternative educational and training provision (extra-muros), and young people who participated in these. This was followed by fieldwork conducted with the vulnerable group of young people who became NEET. Finally, we conducted repeat interviews with young people from all three groups who took part in an interview before.

Altogether, over 180 participants took part in interviews and focus groups, including teachers, education professionals, youth workers, parents, and a diverse mix of over 120 young people. About half of these 120 young people took part in focus groups (n=12) conducted in schools, FE colleges, apprenticeships and youth centres. In addition, in-depth interviews were completed with over 60 young people, at various stages of their transition from education to employment. Of these 60 young people, 26 were re-interviewed to gain a longitudinal perspective of their experiences of leaving compulsory education and transitioning to the next stages of their lives (Clycq et al., 2014). As the qualitative research assistant on the UK team, I was directly involved in the selection and recruitment of most participants, as well as the interviews and focus groups. From the 26 participants who took part in repeat interviews, 15 young people were selected for my doctoral study. The sampling criteria is described in detail in the Methodology chapter (Chapter 4).

The relationship between my doctoral study and the RESL.eu project

As already mentioned, my PhD study was completed in the framework of the RESL.eu project. This section clarifies what is meant by this: what the relationship is between the two, and in what ways my doctoral research departs and differs from the wider project. Most importantly, while my doctoral study was based on data collected as part of RESL.eu, the specific focus, aims and research questions of my PhD study distinguish it from the larger project. The relationship between the two, however, is more complex and dynamic, as it is explained below.

From the early stages of my PhD research I was interested in exploring the role of aspirations in youth transitions, well before data collection had commenced on the RESL.eu project. My interest in this topic grew from my engagement with the academic literature on ESL and the reproduction on inequalities in education, in more general. In my role of full time research assistant on RESL.eu, at the initial stages of the project I was primarily involved in developing the theoretical-conceptual framework of the research. I also worked on the ESL-related policy analysis at an EU, national and local level. At the time, the concept of 'aspirations' was at the forefront of education and youth policies in England, and initiatives based on 'raising aspirations' were being proposed as the main vehicle of improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students (described in more details in Chapter 2). The academic literature, on the other hand, seemed much more restrained regarding the transformative power of aspirations (see Chapter 3). As explained earlier, in the section Rationale for this study, the discrepancy between the academic research findings and policy discourses on the role of aspirations have raised and fuelled my interest in exploring this timely and significant topic.

Thus, while the research questions of my doctoral study have emerged from the preliminary literature review and policy analysis completed for RESL.eu, the focus and aims of my research, as well as the specific research questions were formulated independently from the wider project. RESL.eu had a strong focus on the institutional level, investigating specific intra- and extra-muros measures identified for their role in reducing ESL. My research aimed to explore young people's individual experiences in education, their educational and occupational aspiration, and the decision-making process behind their future planning, including values, motivations, but also resources available to them. Whilst the RESL.eu project concentrated on the processes and mechanisms leading to ESL primarily while young people are still in compulsory education, my main focus was on their experiences while transitioning from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives. Naturally, my PhD study had a narrower scope than the five year long, international research project, presented in the previous section. The latter approached ESL

from a holistic perspective, and investigated this phenomenon at a macro, meso and micro level, across multiple educational and training settings, whereas my doctoral study aimed to examine aspirations from the perspective of the young people themselves.

The theoretical framework of RESL.eu built on theories of social reproduction in education (Bernstein, 1970; Bourdieu, 1984; 1985; 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; 2001; 2002; Coleman, 1966; 1988; Jencks, 1972), and acknowledged the continued relevance of socio-economic status in educational outcomes. In addition, educational differences were also interpreted through an intersectional lens, taking into account the impact of demographic variables including gender, ethnicity and migration background, among others (Driessen, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2010). The project approached ESL from a tripartite perspective, analysing the phenomenon at a structural, institutional and individual level (see Clycq, 2017; Van Praag et al., 2018). In my doctoral study, I narrowed the scope of social reproduction theories, engaging primarily with the theoretical apparatus developed by Bourdieu (1984; 1985; 1990; 1998; 2000), including the concepts of economic, cultural and social capital and habitus, which were part of the RESL.eu conceptual framework too. I also widened my Bourdieusian conceptual toolkit to include the notions of symbolic violence and illusio, as Chapter 3 will present it in more detail.

Given the aims of my research, a qualitative approach seemed the most suitable way of exploring my research questions - specifically individual interviews with young people. RESL.eu provided abundant and rich data to base my PhD study on, therefore it had been decided not to collect any additional data specifically for my research. Consequently, the methodology and methods of this doctoral study, to a large extent, align with the larger project, more specifically WP4: Qualitative analysis of Early School Leaving and Evaluation of Early School Leaving Measures. Compared to the whole body of data collected for RESL.eu, only a relatively small subset of the qualitative data was selected for my doctoral study. As mentioned earlier, only interviews with young people were included. Out of the 60 young people interviewed for RESL.eu, 15 were selected for this enquiry. The process of participant selection will be described in greater length in Chapter 4.

The relationship between the two projects was, however, more complex and dynamic, and not necessarily one-directional. My interest in aspirations has likely shaped the topics investigated during data collection, since the topic guides, interview and focus group schedules, were developed collectively, with all RESL.eu team members involved. In addition, during

fieldwork, each interviewer had the opportunity to ask additional questions relevant for their own research interests. Thus, my doctoral research focus had an impact on the data collected. As it will be discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter, I only included in this doctoral study interviews conducted by myself, specifically because in these cases I had the opportunity to probe topics related to my study in greater depth.

While the RESL.eu data analysis followed a primarily deductive approach, with the data being coded along a number of a priori themes, when re-analysing the data for my doctoral study, my approach was mainly inductive, allowing new themes to emerge. In addition, I combined thematic and narrative analysis, departing even further from the RESL.eu analysis (more details in Chapter 4).

Thus, while my doctoral study was based on data collected as part of RESL.eu, the aims of the two research projects differed significantly, as explained. My PhD study operated with a set of research questions that were formulated independently from RESL.eu. The two projects also diverged in terms of their theoretical frameworks and data analysis. As such, while my doctoral research has built on the experiences and findings of RESL.eu, its specific aims and research questions provided the opportunity to develop a distinctly different research project based on shared data. It is hoped that this research provides useful insight into youth transition processes in London, and can help to identify more effective support services to assist young people leaving education.

Research questions

As explained earlier, the research questions arose from my contemplations about the incongruity observed between the official policy discourse on the pivotal role of aspirations in young people's transition from education to employment[8], and the academic literature highlighting the structural constrains of this transition[9]. Guided by the literature review, 'aspirations' emerged as a useful conceptual tool to explore the '*intersection of identities and inequalities within young people's lives'* (Archer et al., 2013:8). Through this research study - which was completed in the framework of a large, EU-funded project, RESL.eu, as explained in the previous sections, I aimed to explore the following main questions:

1. How are educational and occupational aspirations understood, constructed and implemented by young Londoners who are at risk of educational underachievement?

[8] Presented in greater detail in Chapter 2.

[9] See Chapter 3.

2. What are the beliefs, attitudes and values that shape their aspirations?
3. In what ways do social support systems (school, family, friends) impact on young people's aspirations?
4. To what extent and in what ways do social inequalities manifest and reproduce during 'at-risk' young people's transitions from compulsory education?

Outline of chapters

The structure of the thesis is the following:

Chapter 1. Introduction presents the aims of and the rational for this study. It also provides details about the larger RESL.eu project that this doctoral research was embedded into and explains the connections between the larger project and my PhD research.

Chapter 2. Background to the study provides the structural-systemic context of this research. The chapter starts with a brief summary of statistical information about young people's academic attainment, as well employment figures in London. The rest of the chapter is devoted to education and youth policy analysis pertinent to the topic at question.

Chapter 3. Literature review outlines the literature on aspirations and its intersection with achievement, as well as gender, ethnicity and class. The chapter also describes the theoretical framework this study is drawing on.

Chapter 4. Methodology gives a detailed account of the research design and the methods of this doctoral study. It outlines the selection criteria, access to and recruitment of participants, and repeat interviews as the data collection method. Data analysis methods are also described. Finally, the chapter pays attention to research ethics.

Chapter 5. 15 Portraits – Interlude is devoted to the individual stories of the young people who took part in this research. In addition to providing a voice to participants by allowing their personal account to be told in the midst of analysis, this chapter also aims to help the reader in better situating the findings. Thus, this chapter introduces the participants, setting the scene for further analyses in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 6. Defining aspirations explores aspirations in the light of current theoretical and policy debates. Then, a typology of aspirations is introduced, based largely on the strategy how participants intended to achieve their ambitions.

Chapter 7. Constructing aspirations investigates young people's career decision-making process, looking into the diverse factors that shaped their aspirations. The chapter explores motivational factors and horizons for action.

Chapter 8. Implementing aspirations focuses on young people's strategies employed to negotiate disadvantage and achieve their ambitions. Participants mobilized different types of capital, including economic, social and cultural capital, to negotiate and improve their disadvantaged position in the education field and labour market, and achieve their aspirations. However, the volume and structure of capitals at their disposal was markedly different, with implications to their educational trajectories and transitions to employment.

Chapter 9. Conclusion present a summary of the findings.

CHAPTER 2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

As discussed in the introductory chapter, young people's lives are shaped and influenced by a multitude of complex, often intertwined factors that operate on a macro, meso and micro level. While the analytical chapters (Chapters 5-8) will explore data focusing on the meso level of social networks and on the micro or individual level (without forgetting the impact of macro structures and systemic processes), this chapter provides an overview of the structural context of research participants' lives. The first sections present the specific local context through a summary of relevant education and employment figures, and the economic context in London and the UK. Then, subsequent sections discuss another facet of the structural context, specifically education and youth policies that impact on youth transitions, especially in the specific historical/ political moment in time marked by neoliberal globalisation. Importantly, in this chapter, I focus on the time period when the fieldwork was completed, also taking into account the preceding years that shaped participants' educational trajectories.

Local context: education and youth (un)employment in London

Fieldwork for this study was completed in London over two years, between November 2014 and October 2016. During this period, 15 young people were interviewed twice, with at least 5 months between the two interviews. In some cases, the intervening time was longer, up to 2 years. All participants were identified as being at risk of educational underachievement and becoming NEET[10]. London was chosen as the site of research due to the unique and contradictory opportunity structures it offers. On the one hand, it seems to provide abundant educational and occupational prospects; on the other hand, at the time of the initial case selection, the city had one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country.

London is a global city with an almost 8.7 million population (ONS, 2015). It is one of the world's most ethnically diverse cities. According to the latest Census from 2011, London had the highest proportion of minority ethnic groups in England and Wales (with Black and Indian being the largest BME populations with about 7% each), and the lowest proportion of the White ethnic group at 59.8 %, White British being at 44.9% (ONS, 2012). At the same time, 22.1% of the London population had a main language other than English, the highest proportion in the country; and pupils in London school speak over 300 languages (BBC, 2014). After English,

[10] Participant selection criteria will be discussed in detail in the Methodology Chapter.

the most common languages are Polish (1.9%), Bengali (1.5%) and Gujarati (1.3%) (ONS, 2013a). Not only is London the ethnically and linguistically most diverse city in England, it also has the highest proportion of non-Christians as well as non-UK nationals (ONS, 2013a), with more than a third of Londoners being born outside of the UK. These are, however, average numbers, they can vary significantly among the different boroughs.

London is a relatively young city, compared with the rest of England: according to figures from 2014, one quarter of people living in Inner London and 16% of those from Outer London were aged between 25 and 34, compared with 13% for the rest of the country. As Figure 1 shows, the 25 to 29 age group is the most numerous in Inner London, while in outer London, the 30 to 34 year old age group dominates (Aldridge et al., 2015).

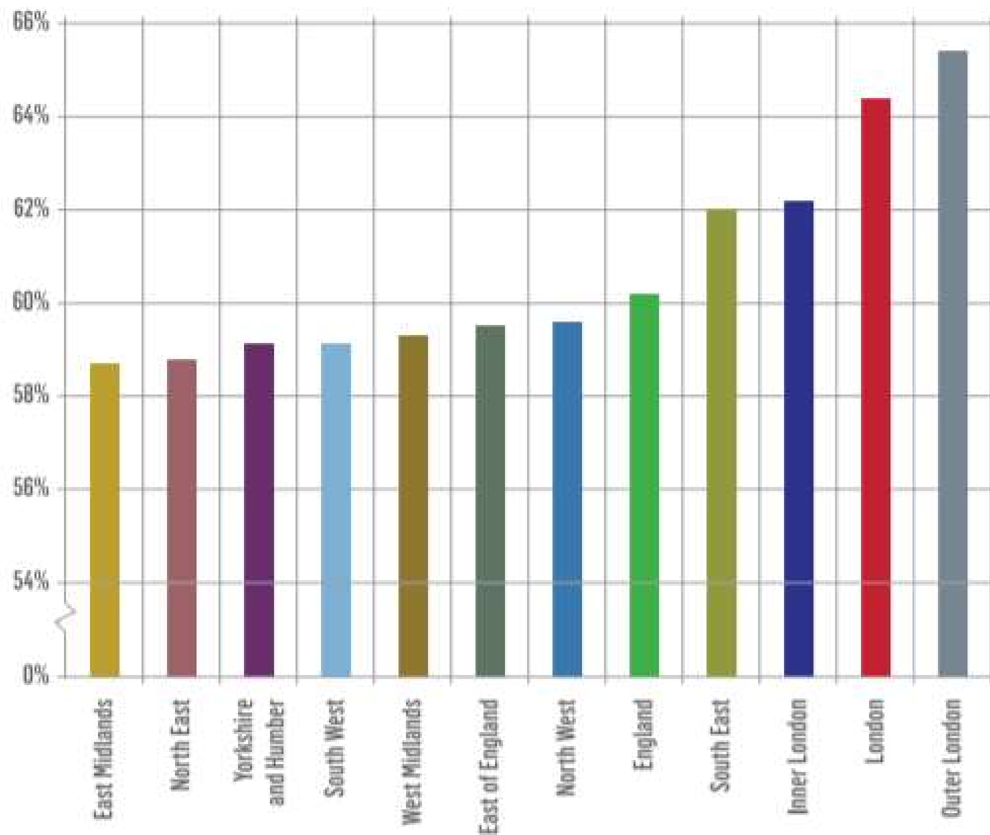
Figure 1. Age profile of London's population (Aldridge et al., 2015)

Thus London has a large and diverse cohort of working age population, especially in those age groups that are still young but likely not first time jobseekers, who had time to accumulate work experience. This creates a very competitive job market, which can make young people's integration into the labour market very difficult.

It adds to young Londoners difficulties that the city has one of the most educated work forces in the world. In 2016, Inner London had the highest concentration of graduates in Europe, where about two third of the population had a tertiary degree (Eurostat, 2016). England itself has a relatively high number of graduates, and London is the highest performing area in the country for education. From 2003/4, London state schools have been outperforming the rest of England in GCSE scores (Baars et. al, 2014). As such, in 2013 (at the start of the case selection for the RESL.eu project), London had the highest GCSE attainment levels, with 64.4 % of

London pupils achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Math, compared with the 60.2% national average (Baars et al., 2014:22).

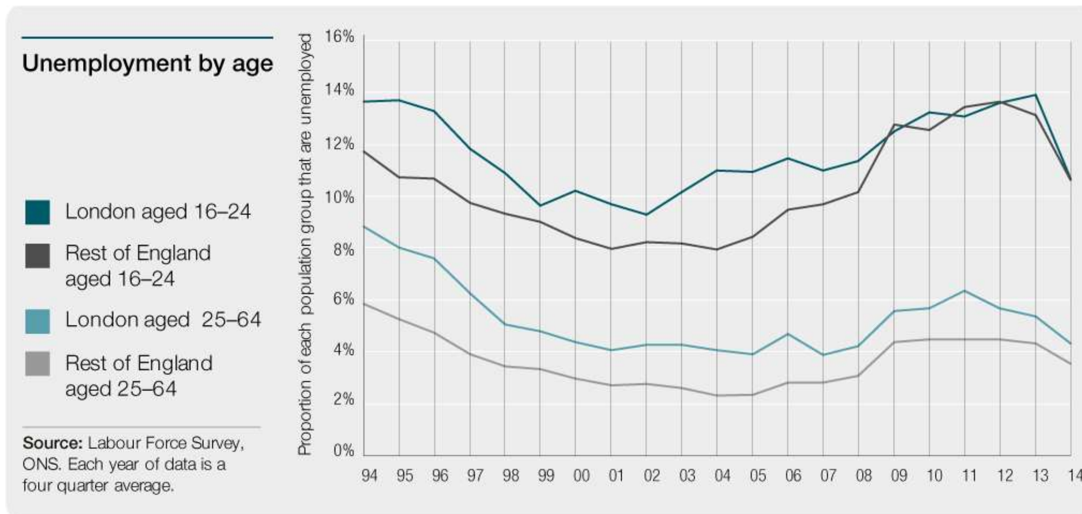
Figure 2. Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and Math by region, 2013 (Baars et al., 2014: 22).



Importantly, data suggests that even pupils from the socio-economically disadvantaged Inner London areas still outperform their peers from the rest of England. These trends continued throughout the fieldwork period (Greater London Authority, 2017).

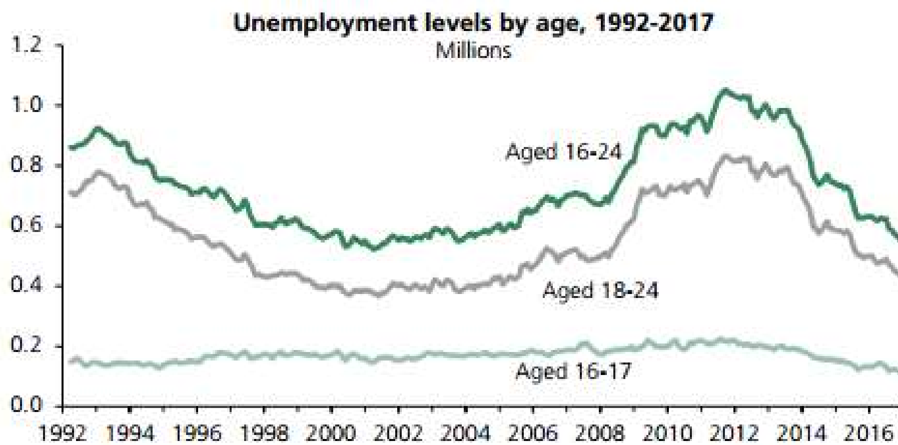
While London performs outstandingly in terms of educational results, young people's employment figures, on the other hand, stay well below the national average. Youth unemployment rates in England are highly regionalised (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015). For decades, London has had higher youth unemployment rates than the rest of the country – and not only as a result of the financial crisis of 2008 (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Unemployment by age and region (Aldridge et al., 2015)



It needs to be highlighted though that unemployment rates can vary significantly across different age sub-groups under the overall 16-24 rate, as illustrated by Figure 4.

Figure 4. Youth unemployment levels by age, UK (McGuinness, 2017)



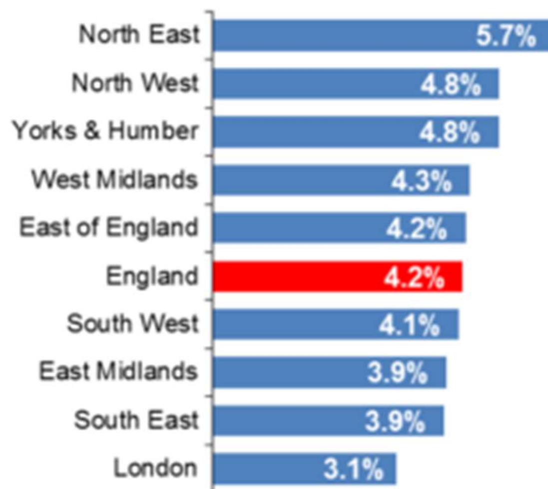
Figures 3 and 4 also show that rates for youth unemployment have decreased lately for all age groups, but these were significantly higher at the beginning of the research project and fieldwork, in 2013-2014. In the period between June-August 2013 - at the time of the RESL.eu case selection - London had the second highest youth unemployment rate in England with 26.5% of 16-24 year olds being unemployed[11]. In addition, London ranked third for 18-24 year olds with an unemployment rate of 22.9% (ONS, 2013b). The high youth unemployment rates

[11] At the time, the North East of England had the highest youth unemployment figures, and as such, it was identified as the second research area for the RESL.eu project, as explained in the Methodology chapter.

in London are suggestive of difficult transitions from education to employment, especially taken into account the relatively high educational standards of London pupils.

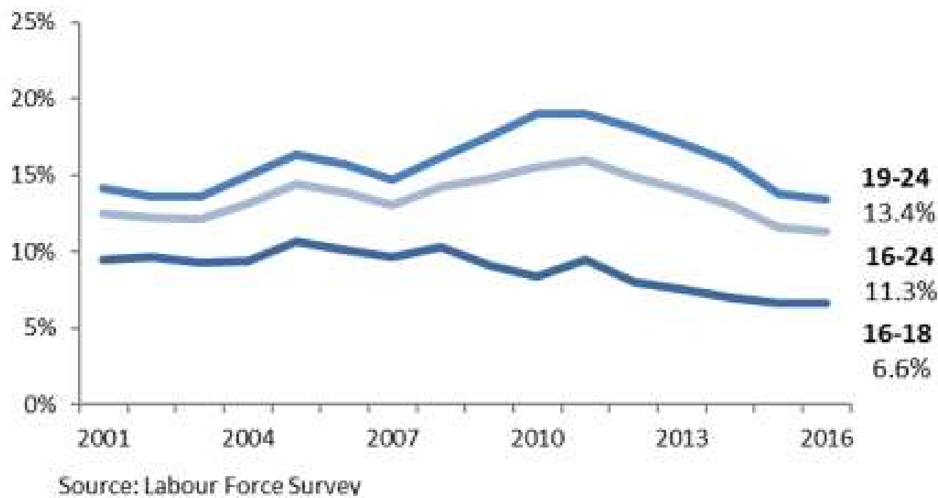
Another measure of youth vulnerability is being NEET. Comparing London rates with the rest of England, NEET figures look much more positive for London than the youth unemployment rates quoted earlier. Figure 5 shows that at the end of 2015, London had the lowest NEET figures for the 16-18 age group in the country.

Figure 5. NEET rates for 16-18 year olds: England, end of 2015 (DfE, 2017a)



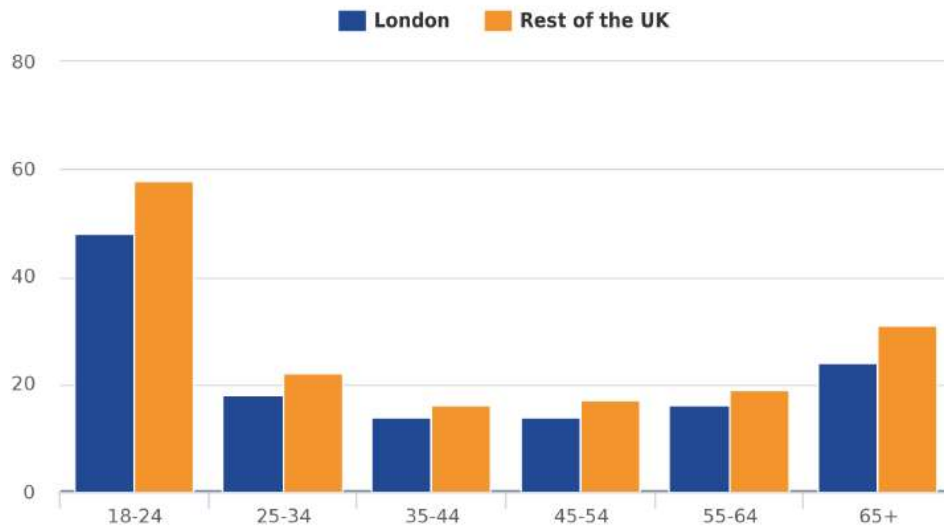
The low NEET levels in London are due to higher participation in education as many young people continue their studies to improve their employment opportunities. NEET rates, just as we have seen with youth unemployment rates, vary significantly by age group and region. As Figure 6 indicates, 16 to 18 years olds tend to have the lowest NEET rates, since they are the most likely to be still in education, especially after raising participation age to 18. According to this legislation (Education and Skills Act, 2008; Education Act, 2011), young people are supposed to study or complete some kind of training until they reach 18. Participation, however, can include not only full time education, but part time education and training, and apprenticeships as well.

Figure 6. NEET rates in the UK, 2001-2016 (DfE, 2017a)



Nevertheless, youth unemployment and NEET figures only give an indication of the most vulnerable, those young people who have not managed to integrate into the labour market at all. These figures do not provide any indication about those who are involved in precarious, low-wage, low-security employment, those who work below their qualifications, are enrolled on never-ending training courses that do not provide any labour market advantage, and/ or are 'churning' between these (Furlong, 2006), likely a much higher number and percentage. Adding to the difficulties, young people are entitled to lower national minimum wage than their older colleagues. For instance, at the start of the fieldwork in 2014, the following national minimum wage rates applied: £2.73 for apprentices; £3.79 per hour for those under 18; £5.13 for 18-20 year olds and £6.50 for above 21 (Gov.uk, 2018). It is not surprising then that young people in general earn significantly less than other age groups (ONS, 2015). Data suggests that in 2014 (when fieldwork started), about half of 18-24 year olds in London did not earn the living wage (ONS, 2015; see Figure 7). According to ONS statistics, between 2008 and 2014 in England, the 18-24 age group witnessed the highest increase (11%) in the proportion of jobs below the living wage (ONS, 2015).

Figure 7. Proportion of employee jobs paid less than the living wage in 2014, by age groups (ONS, 2015)



With all its diversity, abundance of educational institutions and employment opportunities, London is one of the most unequal regions in the country. Here, half of the children and young people below the age of 20 live in a family that receives tax credits. In Inner London, the child poverty rate was 46% in 2015 (slightly lower than a decade before); while in Outer London it was 33% (slightly higher than a decade before), but both higher than in the rest of England (Aldridge et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, in the capital, even children and young people on free school meals - so those from deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds - achieve better at GCSEs, on average, than their peers in the rest of England (Aldridge et al., 2015). But young Londoners face some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country, in spite of a wealth of jobs, job sectors and industries existing in London. While educational attainment figures cannot be directly compared with youth unemployment rates in one location – due to migration and mobility, (since youth unemployment figures include those too who have completed their education somewhere else, and also, some school leavers from London might move away), the disparity between these figures (best education figures, among the lowest employment levels in the country) is striking. In London, the path between aspirations and outcomes can be very diverse and unpredictable, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of structural, institutional and individual factors in realising one's aspirations.

The policy context

It is pivotal to understand education and youth policy that frames young people's lives. In this section, attention will be given to the language of policy and particular discourses in use, since social reality is influenced and, to some extent, constructed by policy, creating the social field where young people navigate constraints, opportunities and challenges, and develop their educational trajectories and occupational strategies. Policies have the power to create new concepts, as well as new interpretations of social reality (Bourdieu, 2000). As Ball explains, '*Policies to greater or lesser extents have a semantic and ontological force'* as they contribute to *'the construction of a social world of meanings, of problems, causes and effects, of relationships, of imperatives and inevitabilities'* (2013:17). In this way, the policy framework creates opportunity structures as well as structures of constraints.

My approach to and understanding of the policy context presented in this chapter has built on the work of Stephen Ball (1998, 2010, 2013, 2016). According to him, policy discourses have a double function (Ball, 2013). On the one hand, the '*need for reform'* (2013: 16) is constructed through policy discourses. For instance, the rationales regarding the demands of the knowledge economy and the need for change in education systems due to globalisation and economic competition, are constructed through policy discourses, and are not necessarily reflections of educational and economic realities. Then secondly, the solutions to the problems constructed in policy discourses, the necessary and adequate responses to these 'needs for reform', are also created through policies (Ball, 2013:16). In this way, policy discourses create social reality as they

> '*privilege certain ideas and topics and speakers and exclude others. Policy discourses also organise their own specific rationalities, making particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and "true". Discourses mobilise truth claims and constitute, rather than simply reflect, social reality. […] They construct the problematic, the inevitable and the necessary.'* (Ball, 2013: 6-7)

In relation to the topic of this study, the policy context delineates what are desirable and/ or acceptable trajectories that young people can take after finishing compulsory education (for example, whether taking the higher education route is more desirable than completing vocational studies or opting for employment); what constitute as adequate qualifications (in this context, the minimum acceptable benchmark being 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and

Math[12]); what qualities and skills should a well-educated young person have; and so on. The 'aspiration discourse' itself is produced in policy: for instance, the much-repeated mantra that certain social groups, families and individuals have low aspirations, and that is the main cause of their underachievement in education as well as the subsequent negative later life outcomes, including becoming NEET, unemployment, poverty, lack of civic participation, health issues. Problem categories are constructed through policy discourses too, be that 'at-risk' pupils, early school leavers, school dropouts, young unemployed or NEETs (Swadener and Lubeck, 1995). As Ball explains, social positions – such as students, apprentices, NEETs, teachers, parents, and so on are also products of discourses. Policies also produce various practices (Ball, 2013:7) – in our case, various exams, such as GCSEs and A levels; UCAS applications; employability and other NEET programmes could be listed under this label.

As a result, youth transitions cannot be adequately explored and understood without taking into account the context of educational and youth policies that impact on, and, arguably create the broader structures in which institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities operate, and the social field where young people navigate after finishing compulsory education.

In this section, the concept of 'policy' will be clarified. When outlining the jurisdiction under discussion, some peculiarities of the British education system will be highlighted. This will be followed by a brief historical overview of the development of the English state education. After this short historical overview, relevant recent policy initiatives will be described, focusing on those related to aspirations and youth transitions. An analysis of the 'aspiration discourse' in British and English education policy will also be provided. Then, relevant policy initiatives will be described that were introduced with the aim of helping young people in realising their ambitions, including those related to raising attainment and aspirations in secondary education; career information, advice and guidance; further and higher education; apprenticeships; and policies addressing youth unemployment and NEETs. Through this brief overview of recent English education policies, this section will explore the relationship between social inequalities and education, and the role of education in society posited in policy discourses.

It needs to be highlighted, that I am not aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of English education policy initiatives and reforms, only to provide the policy context of this study. For decades, English education policy has been characterised by 'hyperactivism' (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987) and 'policy overload' (Ball, 2013), with an 'unprecedented' '*depth, breadth*

[12] The GCSE grading system has changed after the study.

and pace of change' and '*level of government activity'* in education (Coffield, 2006:2). It would take much longer than a thesis to present a detailed summary and the bewildering complexity of English education policy.

Defining 'policy'

Before addressing educational policy debates in England, it needs to be clarified what is understood under the word 'policy'. This seems to be one of those ubiquitous terms that are used by academics, policy makers and the general public all the time, but often with a different meaning or not defined at all. Building on Ball (2013), in this thesis, the term 'policy' will be used in its 'common-sense' understanding '*as something constructed within government'*, as '"*formal" and legislated policy*' (Ball, 2013:8). It needs to be mentioned however, that policies are not always translated directly into institutional practices, instead they are contested, resisted, misunderstood, interpreted, inflected or mediated in different institutional settings, '*made and remade in many sites'* (Ball, 1994; 2013:8-9). Since education and youth policy per se is not the focus of this PhD study, only official policy discourses will be presented and analysed – in their capacity of having 'ontological force' that creates social reality, as described earlier; without examining their complex translation into practice, which is always case specific. Nonetheless, 'policy' is still understood as an '*on-going, interactional and unstable'* process (Ball, 2013:8):

> '*In a sense everything in the policy world is really just process, the movement of people and programs around common problems such as education, transport and employment. None of the initiatives in these fields stays fixed for very long because the problems themselves keep moving and changing*.' (Considine, 1994:3-4, quoted in Ball, 2013:9)

This aspect of policy – being a process instead of an outcome or object, explains why policy can be messy, inconsistent or vague and imprecise (Ball, 2013), as it will be discussed later on.

Defining the jurisdiction

In the present study, only the English policy environment and discourse will be considered - as opposed to British or UK policy. Although there are many similarities between the education policies in the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom due to similar legislative frameworks and social contexts (Machin, McNally and Wyness, 2012), the four countries still have significant differences in their education systems and policies, both currently and historically. Although England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are all facing similar challenges posed by globalisation, the neoliberal policy agenda promoting market logics in

education has been adopted most profoundly in England (Alexiadou and Ozga, 2002; Alexiadou, 2005).

It also needs mentioning that education policy and the academic literature around it focus on state schools, which are under central government control. However, England (and the United Kingdom, more generally) has a diverse school system ranging from publicly funded, state schools to fee charging private schools, the so-called 'independent schools' (Gov.uk, n.d.). According to the Independent Schools Council' figures (2016), around 6.5% of the total number of school children in the UK are educated in the independent sector. In England this number is slightly higher at over 7% of the total number of school children, with the figure rising to more than 18% of pupils over the age of 16 (ibid).

But even within the category of state education there is considerable variety. While state schools are under the direct control of local authorities – themselves weakened by recent policy moves, described in later sections, there is a growing number of diverse educational providers including academies, free schools, University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools which report back to the Department for Education, instead of the local authorities. The dichotomy between state schools and private schools, largely attended by the children of the upper middle class, is not reflected in the policy discourse, as private schools do not come under the same regulatory framework as state schools.

Broadly speaking, in England the upper middle class can afford to send their children to fee-paying schools, whilst less financially well-off (but still comfortably middle income) families may seek instead to relocate to the catchment area of a well performing state school. Lower middle and working class families who cannot afford to move house have little choice but to send their children to the local school, regardless of its quality (Ball, 1993, Ball et al., 1996).

Education policy in England: brief historical overview

> '*The history of English education is very much a history of social class'* (Ball, 2016:190).

State education in England: from the beginnings to the 1990s

As mentioned in the Introduction, education has been a key political issue for subsequent governments in the UK (Ball, 2013). Consequently, the policy landscape for secondary education in England has been characterised by constant change in the last few decades

(Higham and Yeomans, 2011). However, these subsequent waves of education policy changes failed to address the class-based inequalities deeply entrenched in the English education system (Reay, 2006).

State education in England emerged in the 19th century and was developed with the aim of managing the new urban working classes and accommodating the social and political aspirations of the new middle classes. As a result, class-based inequalities were built in the English public education system from its inception. Comprehensive, universal and free state elementary education was only established at the beginning of the 20th century (Ball, 2013). Technical education did not develop successfully, because industrialisation occurred relatively early and effectively in England, therefore the country did not face economic pressures that required an educational expansion, seen in other European countries such as Germany (Ball, 2013). The legacy of these early characteristics can still be felt in the present education system, as it will be presented later on.

The Education Act 1944 is considered by many a watershed moment in the history of English education policy: by granting free secondary education for all, participation in education increased significantly (McKenzie, 2001). This education reform introduced the so-called tripartite system, which divided secondary educational institutions into grammar schools for the academically inclined pupils; secondary moderns and technical schools – the latter very underdeveloped. Pupils were sorted into different types of schools based on the 11-Plus attainment test, envisaged as an intelligence-test meant to categorise children into three different groups based on academic ability: '*pupils of a particular type of mind would receive the training best suited for them and that training would lead them to an occupation where their capacities would be suitably used*' (Norwood Committee Report, cited by Ball 2013:74). In reality, test results and subsequent educational trajectories were, to a large extent, determined by social class. Although policy makers aimed for parity of esteem between the different types of schools, this aim was not achieved.

Nonetheless, the Education Act 1944 was a significant moment in the development of English education, notwithstanding the above mentioned shortcomings. According to Ball, '*it represented the clearest, although still equivocal, commitment of the state for the responsibility for compulsory educational provision*' (2016:190). It raised the school leaving age to 15, and provided access to grammar schooling for a small proportion of working class students (ibid; McKenzie, 2001). Through all these, it brought a '*very modest loosening of the relationship*

between social class and educational opportunity' in the English secondary education system (Ball, 2016:190), but still continued with a '*class-divided vision of education'* (Ball, 2013:74).

Debates about social inequalities in education have already surfaced in the 1930's. After the Second World War and the introduction of the tripartite system, these debates increased, due to mounting evidence of unequal educational participation and outcomes for working class pupils (Spohrer, 2012) and the reproduction of social inequalities in and through the education system (Ball, 2013). In the next two decades, several government reports problematised this issue. The Early Leaving Report (Gurney-Dixon, 1954), for example, showed that working class children leave education earlier and with fewer qualifications than their middle class peers, even when they attend the same schools (Ball, 2013). It also became increasingly clear that grammar schools remained the preserve of middle class children, with only a highly selected minority of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieving admission to them.

From the second half the 1970s, English education policy has been increasingly influenced by neoliberal and neo-conservative ideas, including the growing importance of economic principles in education, to the detriment of equity related issues (Ball, 2008; Spohrer, 2012). Under the conservative Thatcher government, education policy discourse became dominated by a 'narrative of educational crisis in terms of quality and performance' (Mulderrig, 2009), which has been prevalent ever since. The Thatcher era in Britain (1979-1990) represents the transition to a new economic policy marked by deregulation, privatisation, deindustrialisation and structural unemployment (ibid).

The neoliberal paradigm shift from the 1980s needs to be understood in the context of global education policy changes. In the last decades of the 20th century, neoliberal ideas relating to competition, privatisation and marketisation of the education system started spreading across the globe (Ball, 1993). Then again, England – together with the United States - was at '*the epicentre of the neoliberal reform, a laboratory for the Global Education Reform Movement'* (Sahlberg, 2010 cited by Wrigley, 2016:102). While neoliberalism has many definitions, in education policy it usually refers to certain key ideas, such as defining the role of education from an economic perspective, and viewing children, young people and lifelong learners as receptacles of human capital that can be developed and utilised for the benefit of the economy (Wrigley, 2016). Education policy reforms described as 'neoliberal' are often preoccupied with enhancing accountability frameworks through standardised tests, school league tables, examination bodies such as Ofsted, and so on; privatisation of the education market; they focus

on outcomes; to just mention a few. Neoliberalism employs hegemonic discourses in education about standards, choice, and leadership (ibid).

In the early 1980s in Britain, unemployment rose significantly as a result of closing down of the country's traditional industrial and manufacturing base. Young people were disproportionately affected by these economic changes. This provided the socio-economic context for a shift in the education policy discourse regarding the role of education in society. In the 1980s, upper secondary education and training was the subject of widespread reforms concerning qualifications and a transition to a centralised approach (Hodgson and Spours, 2011). A range of vocational qualifications were introduced (Higham and Yeoman, 2011). The concept of competitiveness and more pronounced future orientation gained attention under the Conservative government of John Major (1990-97) (Mulderrig, 2009). The subsequent New Labour government continued with the neoliberalisation of the English education system, as it will be discussed in the next section.

Education, education, education. Changes and trends in English education policy under New Labour

Education and youth policy had featured highly on the agenda of the New Labour government (1997-2010) and the subsequent Conservative-led governments alike. Before their election in 1997, Tony Blair declared that his party's priorities were: '*Education, education, education'*. The subsequent coalition government started to change the education system in the very first month after being elected in 2010. While there were clear differences between the New Labour and the later Conservative-led governments' education policies, they all continued with the same paradigm in many aspects, in particular, neoliberal policy initiatives and the subordination of education to the perceived needs of the globalised market and knowledge-based economy.

The New Labour government under Tony Blair elected in 1997 continued with neoliberal education reforms. This period is marked by an emphasis on skills acquisition as a means to realise economic competitiveness; and the gradual withdrawal of the state. The government wished to be perceived as an 'overseer', a manager and facilitator rather than actor. At the same time, a discourse of social inclusion was very prominent in education reforms. Social inclusion however was defined in labour market terms, as an opportunity to participate in the economic production (Hodgson and Spours, 2011a).

New Labour's mantra after their election was: '*High quality education for the many rather than excellence for the few'* (Whitty and Anders, 2012). In order to increase access to education, continuous qualification reforms were enacted, including the two-stage A-level, modular assessment regime, encouraging the combination of general and applied study, and the introduction of 14-19 Diplomas (Hodgson and Spours, 2011). However, the division between the two pathways – GCSEs and A levels for academic studies, and a range of vocational qualifications – was preserved: the White Paper entitled *14-19 Education and Skills* (DfES, 2005) did not implement the recommendation for a unified upper secondary system recommended by the Tomlinson report (2004). In this dual framework however, the boundaries between the two pathways were increasingly blurred: under the Increased Flexibility Programme, it was possible to mix academic and vocational subjects; applied and vocational qualifications (for example, applied GCSEs, BTEC qualifications and 14-19 Diplomas) received considerable credit in school performance tables; also, equivalencies between academic and vocational qualifications were established. This government invested heavily in the development of the vocational path, focusing on the 14-19 Diplomas. Instead of concentrating on curriculum content, however, Labour focused on managing through inspection, funding practice, performance measures and granting generous credit for vocational qualifications (Hodgson and Spours, 2011).

The New Labour government aimed at 'narrowing' the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic background. They introduced a considerable number of educational initiatives, such as: National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy; area-based initiatives – Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, London Challenge; individually targeted interventions such as Raising Recovery; extended school service; increasing the number of teaching assistants; improving the quality of teaching; investing in school leadership training; creating a network of specialist schools; setting up academy schools; Sure Start for early years; setting up the Connexions career advice service and the Every Child Matters multi-agency policy (Whitty and Anders, 2012). Several of these proved very successful: the Extended Schools; London Challenge (Whitty and Anders, 2012); regeneration of the Apprenticeship scheme and the provision of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) (Machin and Vignoles, 2006).

Extended Schools and full service extended schools were designed to provide additional services for the students and their families, working closely with the local community. These include various activities and learning support, childcare, adult and family learning, sport and

ICT. The evaluation of the pilot programme found that in Extended Schools, a higher number of students achieved the national benchmark of five A*-C GCSEs at 16 than nationally, having a particularly positive effect on the most deprived families and students (Cummings et al, 2007). Another evaluation report of the outcomes of a decade of extended school provision (Carpenter et al., 2011) found strong evidence for the effectiveness of this initiative in keeping students engaged in learning and raising participation level. Positive outcomes were identified not only for students but their families, which can further enhance educational outcomes. However, Carpenter et al. (2011) highlighted that these positive effects are much dependent on how effectively the services were targeted on those most in need. Services with the explicit aim of raising attainment, such as study support, were found to be the most effective in achieving this aim. Nonetheless, the evidence is compelling that providing services for the whole family and working in partnership with the local community and other schools has beneficial effects and can be effective in raising attainment (Whitty and Anders, 2012).

During the New Labour era, the quality of London schools had been transformed (Whitty and Anders, 2012), so that London pupils started performing better at all ages and levels than the rest of the country (Wyness, 2011). Due to the complex interplay of factors it is difficult to prove the exact effect of different measures, however, the implementation of the London Challenge initiative might well be one of the explanatory factors of this success. The programme's objective was to improve the standard of secondary and, later, primary schools in London. It included a system-wide approach with a range of interventions: partnership between central government, schools and boroughs; transforming failing schools into academies; making resources and programmes available to all London schools; providing individualised support to the most disadvantaged pupils; working closely with the 33 London boroughs; and continuous professional development opportunities for teachers and head teachers (Whitty and Anders, 2012). As already discussed earlier in chapter, the increase in the number of students achieving 5 or more good GCSEs is higher in London than the rest of the country.

Another successful attempt at raising participation levels was the Education Maintenance Allowance policy, which provided financial help to young people from disadvantaged background if they stayed in full time post-compulsory education (Machin and Vignoles, 2006). A number of studies found that the EMA increased participation rates by up to 7% (Bynner, 2012). The scheme had the most positive impact on boys from low-income families (one of the most at-risk groups for low achievement). However, the Coalition government discontinued

this scheme in October 2010, as part of implementing budget cuts, in spite of the evidence of its effectiveness. The scrapping of the study support led to recurring student protests around England (BBC News, 2010, 2011).

These policies had many positive results, including increased access to education for young people with low socio-economic status (SES), improved GCSE and A level results, and a rise in participation rates in post-compulsory full time education after 16 (Whitty and Anders, 2012). The implementation of the new vocational qualifications did have some unexpected consequences too: some schools - especially those with poorer performance - embraced vocational subjects in order to improve their position in performance tables, neglecting traditional, more academic subjects, thus contributing to the preservation of inequalities between students from different backgrounds. There is some evidence for the negative effects of the audit-driven approach to education (Thomson, Hall and Jones, 2010). Whitty and Anders (2012) mention that the positive educational outcomes under New Labour might actually be attributable to the prolonged economic growth and demographic changes of this period rather than the education reforms.

Many of the successful schemes discussed above seem to be based on principles that are diametrically opposite to those behind the initiatives of the Conservative governments. Schemes such as London Challenge and Extended Schools are based on multi-agency cooperation between schools and working together with the local community, local authority and the students' families. In contrast, present policy thinking encourages competition between schools and school autonomy, free of local authority control (Bynner, 2012; Storey, 2018).

It seems that financial incentives (EMA, apprenticeships) are very important for students from low income families, those who are most at risk of ESL. In addition, cooperation between schools, families and local communities seem to have the most positive effect on educational attainment. The historical argument that '*education cannot compensate for society'* (Bernstein, 1970) is still valid: while the gender and minority achievement gap is closing, socio-economic differences in educational outcomes are as significant as ever, in spite of decades of constant education reforms and significant resources channelled towards improving attainment. It can therefore be safely concluded that structural changes in the larger society and holistic policy interventions aimed at the macro-, meso- and micro-level are needed for improving the educational outcomes of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Raffo et al., 2007). Education can compensate for society, but only to a limited degree. The main objectives of

New Labour education reforms were raising participation and attainment. As such, the Labour government passed the Education and Skills Act in 2008 that prescribed raising the statutory participation age to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015[13]. One the other hand, the neoliberalised New Labour government of Tony Blair introduced tuition fees in higher education for home students in 1998[14]. These tuition fees have been continuously rising ever since. The Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–2015) carried on implementing this reform (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan, 2012).

The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, England and Wales (Pring et al., 2009) highlighted the damaging effect of too many educational reforms and of ignoring the socio-economic context of educational inequalities. Its main recommendations for future initiatives were: a broader vision of education; more adequate performance indicators; re-distribution of power and decision-making; more collaboration at local level and the development of a more unified qualification system (ibid).

Conservative-led education policy from 2010 onwards

The Conservative-led coalition government elected in May 2010 presented their education model in the 2010 schools White Paper, The Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010), which promoted the reform of the whole education system. The major themes of this policy documents were: improving the quality of teaching, enhancing school autonomy and supporting children from disadvantaged background[15] (Morris, 2011). Michael Gove, the divisive and much-criticised Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2014, announced the reform of the National Curriculum, the introduction of an English Baccalaureate and a more rigorous assessment system, and returning to a more 'traditional approach' to education. The recommendations of the Wolf Review of 14-19 Vocational Education (Wolf, 2011) were largely accepted: further development of the Apprenticeship scheme, general education to age 16, and the abolition of equivalencies between academic and vocational qualifications.

In line with the ethos of freeing schools from local authority control, a range of new types of schools have been introduced in addition to academies: parents, teachers, charities, religious organisations are able to set up free schools; University Technical Schools and Studio Schools

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[13] Participation does not have to be in full time education, the other two acceptable options being apprenticeships and part-time training courses for those who work or volunteer full time.
[14] Fees for overseas students were already introduced by the Thatcher government.
[15] Although the latter two aims may arguably be incompatible.

are developed in partnership with commercial organisations. Taken together, academies and free schools now constitute a model of a national education system that bypasses local authorities, increases the involvement of private providers, drastically reduces the importance of nationally bargained terms and conditions for teachers, and decentralises various educational decisions. Although it has been claimed (Whitty and Anders, 2012) that academies improved their performance compared to their earlier results, some of these outcomes can be attributed to the change in the socio-economic background of their pupil intake subsequent to the school's change in status: i.e. the new academies started attracting families with higher socio-economic background. In addition, the results are mixed: while some academies improved their attainment, others were less successful.

The speed with which the coalition government undertook the restructuring of the state education system following their election in May 2010 gives some indication of the importance placed on education by the Conservative party. These policies, however, were met by widespread opposition from head teachers, teachers and students alike. Coalition policy discourse – very much determined by Conservative ideals – claimed a decisive break with Labour policy. However, the analysis of policy documents does not entirely support this. According to Wright (2012), their education model could be perceived rather as the next stage in the neoliberal market-led education reforms of the last three decades. While New Labour attempted to combine neoliberal ideas with a strong communitarian discourse and social-democratic tradition, the coalition government fully embraced neoliberalism and the marketisation of public services (Wright, 2012).

Regarding coalition reforms, Hodgson and Spours (2011) praised their focus on knowledge acquisition, the apparent democratic intent and raising questions about the purpose of education. On the other hand, a number of weaknesses were identified, such as the risk of a return to a tripartite education system with an academic, technical and a practical route with little permeability between them; and rigid qualifications from age 14, which may increase inequalities in education. There seemed to be resistance to these policies at an institutional level with teachers voicing concerns about the new curriculum and assessment methods. The pace of educational reforms seemed to slow down after the departure of Michael Gove from his role as Secretary of State for Education in July 2014. Nonetheless, the (continuous) reform of the education system is still on the agenda of the subsequent Conservative governments too.

The stated objectives of the Conservative policy reforms included keeping young people in education for longer to give them further opportunities to learn new skills and gain higher qualification – in line with the raising participation age agenda. Another important aspect was improving vocational education, focusing on apprenticeships. As discussed earlier, England has a very complex system of vocational qualifications due to constant policy interference. While there are a large number of different vocational qualifications, many of these qualifications have little educational and labour market value (Machin and Vignoles, 2006). One exception is the Modern Apprenticeship scheme, introduced in 1995, which provides high quality learning and is moreover highly valued by employers (Machin and Vignoles, 2006; Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018). In 2016, the Conservative government had a target of three million new apprenticeships by 2020. In addition, it was intended that apprenticeships will be given the same legal treatment as degrees. Through the apprenticeship levy, the Government planned to raise over £3 billion a year by 2019-20, of which £2.5 billion to be spent on apprenticeships in England alone (Mirza-Davies, 2016).

Policy initiatives aimed at reforming the vocational educational offer, including the realisation of parity of esteem between the academic and vocational route, operate alongside the continued privileging of the academic route. Another change regarding education can be noticed in the distribution of responsibility for the solution of social problems: the role of philanthropy and business in the delivery of education and training is growing. A list of non-state actors are embedded in state provision through initiatives like: academies, free schools, studio schools, trust schools, Teach First, teaching schools, Troops to Teachers[16] – moving back towards a messy, patchy and diverse education system, with a variety of providers (Ball, 2016).

The academic evaluation of neoliberal educational policies characterised by the '*colonisation of education policy by economic imperatives*' (Ball,1998) is mostly negative (Allais, 2012, Ball, 1998, Levin, 2010, Raffo et al., 2007). In this policy paradigm, education is conceived as central in solving both social and economic problems, its duty being to increase economic competitiveness, and at the same time providing social justice as well. Allais (2012) notes that there is no solid empirical evidence that these educational reforms are effective in providing solutions for all social and economic problems despite having been implemented in many

[16] Troops to Teachers (TtT) is a national programme that is targeted at military service leavers to become teachers (CTP 2017).

countries already - the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the UK – and spreading around the world, with similar consequences.

Grubb and Lazerson (2004) draw attention to the contradiction between the grand mission attributed to education ('education gospel'[17]) on one hand, and undermining the autonomy and professionalism of the education system with constant political tinkering that does not take into account education's institutional, structural and societal aspects, on the other. As demonstrated by Allais (2012), '*the economistic ideology of individuals and markets [...] is not compatible with the process/ sphere of education'* and leads to the failure of such programmes. 'Accountability' for example has come to mean greater surveillance, competition and performance-related pay.

This policy discourse emphasising accountability, individual responsibility and choice is based on the assumption that lack of motivation and aspiration are the roots of educational underperformance (Gorard, 2010; Keep and James, 2012, Levin, 2010); while ignoring key obstacles to educational attainment, such as the financial limitations of young people from low-income families and lack of adequate learning provision. In this way, attention is focused entirely on the supply-side, individual 'employability' and drawn away from economic problems that affect demand for labour – socio-economic inequality and lack of employment opportunities (Biggart, 2007, Hayward and Williams, 2011) and a large percentage of insecure, low-paid jobs (Keep and James, 2012). Unemployment is redefined as a 'learning problem' (Allais, 2012) shifting responsibility from the state to the individual (Wright, 2012). This approach and the increasing policy emphasis on parental choice are likely to increase existing socio-economic inequalities in education (Reay, 2004).

This brief discussion on recent developments in education policy in England seems to illustrate Levin's (2010) assessment that these are often driven more by current issues and 'untested assumptions and beliefs' than empirical evidence. Morris (2011) demonstrates how policy makers mix and match data in order to legitimate ideologically motivated reforms. One main reason for the inefficiency of education policies to reduce socio-economic disadvantage is that the education system alone cannot overcome all society's ills (Ball, 2010; Levin, 2010; Pring,

[17] Grubb and Lazerson (2004) analyse education policy in the US, however their conclusions about the rationales and results of the 'education gospel' are valid for the UK context as well where a similar approach has been dominating the education policy agenda.

2009); as Bernstein (1970) declared, *'education cannot compensate for society'*[18]. Social class inequalities in educational outcomes are reflections of inequalities present in the broader society.

Instead of addressing the underlying cause, education policies tend to focus on the structural aspects of the education system - for example governance, finance, accountability, improving the workforce (Levin, 2010) – so-called meso-level factors, which can be changed relatively easily (Raffo et al., 2007). Levin (2010:740) notes that these policies have all been profoundly influenced by '*dominant ideas rooted in economic systems such as managerialism, choice, markets and incentives – the so-called neoliberal educational reforms. Thus the emphasis is on decentralisation, competition, leadership, inspection, and accountability'*. These types of changes are being implemented around the world in spite of a dearth of evidence of sustained positive impact. In fact, the results are mostly negative. For instance, identifying competition and choice as the drivers of progress in England may have generated improvement in individual schools but did not improve the education system as a whole (Glatter, Woods, and Bagley, 1997; Whitty, Power, and Halpin, 1998). What is more, competitive pressures on schools might actually increase inequalities both within and among them (Ball, 1993; Gorard and Fitz, 1998). In international comparison, decentralised education systems do not seem to perform better than centrally managed ones either (Levin, 2010). On the contrary, the PISA[19] results

> '*show with deafening clarity that those that have pursued neo-liberal reforms in the fastest and deepest manner, such as England, perform very poorly in educational standards. Meanwhile those that have defended a social democratic vision and explicitly valued professional autonomy such as Finland have produced top rate educational standards it [sic] would seem time to seriously scrutinise the neo-liberal orthodoxy in the field of education'* (Goodson, 2010).

It is apparent that within government policies there are multiple, perhaps even conflicting agendas in relation to how education should be developed. On the one hand, there seems to be a push for equipping young people with in-demand skills through the apprenticeship programme. As explained by a government policy manager, the Government wishes to make

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[18] While education cannot compensate for society, it can have positive impact, as it had in many cases. For instance, the gender gap has been reversed with girls outperforming boys in most levels and subjects (although not in the hard sciences) (ibid, Biggart 2007); and previously underachieving minority ethnic groups have improved their attainment levels (Whitty and Anders, 2012).

[19] The OECD's 'Programme for International Student Assessment' study.

sure that all young people gain the skills that they need for successful participation in the labour market. A key part of the Government's action has been to reform the nature of education and training available to make sure that it is of high quality. On the other hand, the pressure on schools to raise attainment at GCSE and A-Level appears to reinforce the privileging of academic qualifications.

In conclusion, England was among the first countries that implemented neoliberal educational reforms. The last three decades have been marked by constant policy interventions promoting the marketisation of the education system, managerialism, increasing school autonomy, and a discourse of individual aspirations, choice and responsibility. While the New Labour government introduced a number of reforms explicitly aimed at combating social exclusion and social inequalities in education along neoliberal education reforms, the successive Conservative-led governments seem to have fully adopted the ideals of neoliberalism. National and international research evidence indicates however that it is possible that these may only serve to increase existing social inequalities in education.

To conclude, it seems that the education and training system in England has been undergoing historical changes that will likely have widespread consequences - at a time of economic downturn that affects young people disproportionately. While adequate reforms of the education and training system could potentially contribute to improving young people's labour market opportunities, it is unlikely that education policy initiatives alone will solve the issue of large-scale youth unemployment.

The construction of the 'aspiration problem' in the English policy discourse

In the neoliberal political imagination, the reform of the education system is expected to tackle multiple economic and social ills: preparing young people for the 'knowledge economy' of the near future; ensuring economic competitiveness and at the same time, tackling social inequality and ensuring social mobility. The concept of aspiration plays an integral part in this.

According to Spohrer[20] (2012), in Britain, the discourse on aspirations started emerging from 1997 onwards across a range of interconnected policy fields including social and welfare policy, education, economic and labour market policy. The concept of aspiration however has been

[20] In her doctoral thesis, she completed a discourse analysis on 40 policy documents from the 1997-2011 period, which had 'aspirations' as a key topic. Through this, she investigated the construction of the concept of 'aspirations' in the British policy discourse, and examined the discursive constructions that underpin these policy debates.

used in educational, psychological, sociological and labour market research, before the term became a mainstream concept in policy debates (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). Butler and Hamnett (2011) argued that while the term was adopted by the Tony Blair's New Labour party in the run-up to the 1997 General Election, it has remained a central theme under successive governments.

The notion of aspirations is embedded in the debate around the persistent link between socio-economic background and educational, economic and social outcomes in British society (Spohrer, 2011). In this discourse, people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly portrayed as having depressed aspirations. Lower academic attainment and participation in education and labour market activities is then attributed to this presumed lack of aspirations (Spohrer, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). In this policy discourse, raising disadvantaged young people's (and their families') aspirations became the main mechanism of tackling social disadvantage, realising upward social mobility and through this, achieving greater economic prosperity (Spohrer, 2012). In his speech at the Labour party conference in 2007, Gordon Brown – then leader of the party - provided a comprehensive summary of the aspiration discourse, starting this section with a statement about the 'poverty of aspiration' in some parts of society (Brown, 2007):

> '*How much talent that could flourish is lost through a poverty of aspiration: wasted not because young talents fail to reach the stars but because they grow up with no stars to reach for?'*

The presumed individual dispositions and lack of achievements of these young people was then linked to issues in the wider society:

> '*So this is the next chapter in our progress. The next stage of our country's long journey to build the strong and fair society.*
>
> *I want a Britain where there is no longer any ceiling on where your talents and hard work can take you.*
>
> *Where what counts is not what where you come from and who you know, but what you have it in yourself to become.'*

Having the right kind of aspirations thus becomes a 'social equalizer', the main (if not only) prerequisite of social mobility.

‘In the new Britain of this generation, we must unlock all the talents of all of the people.

Not the old equality of outcome that discounts hard work and effort.

Not the old version of equality of opportunity - the rise of an exclusive meritocracy where only some can succeed and others are forever condemned to fail.’

As we can see, the aspiration discourse re-defines social justice and fairness. According to the new definition, one’s position in life will be determined by their individual effort only, which will then lead to a ‘genuine meritocracy’:

‘But a genuinely meritocratic Britain, a Britain of all the talents.

Where all are encouraged to aim high.

And all by their effort can rise.’

The state is only responsible for lifting the barriers that could hinder people’s ambitions. After that it becomes the individual’s responsibility and even ethical and duty to realise their ‘high aspirations’.

‘*A Britain of aspiration and also a Britain of mutual obligation where all play our part and recognise the duties we owe to each other*.’

Gordon Brown then claimed this ‘aspirational spirit’ for his New Labour party:

‘*New Labour: now the party of aspiration and community. Not just occupying but shaping and expanding the centre ground. A strong Britain; a fairer Britain.*’

In this discourse, raising aspiration is posited to tackle a range of social problems at different levels of society. On an individual level, citizens are expected to attain social ascent and desirable life outcomes by having and following their high aspirations. Accomplishing social mobility on a community level will bring about a ‘fair’, ‘just’ and ‘meritocratic’ society, realising economic prosperity for the whole nation. Chapters 7 and 8 will reveal that this ideology had a significant impact on young people’s beliefs, attitudes and values.

As we could see in the previous section, there were some significant differences between the education policies of the New Labour and the following coalition government. Their stance regarding the notion of aspirations however was remarkably similar; in fact, both major political parties adopted the aspiration discourse.

> *'Aspiration is not about class, background or position. Everybody dreams of rising up in the world, and everybody dreams of giving their children a better life. I don't care where you started out in life; my mission is to help you rise higher'* - said David Cameron in the same year (2007:1).

Not only was the discourse on aspiration adopted, but a few years later, in 2012, at another party conference – the Conservative one this time, David Cameron claimed the whole 'aspiration ethos' for the Conservative party:

> '*Aspiration is the engine of progress. Countries rise when they allow their people to rise. (…) That's why the mission for this government is to build an aspiration nation … to unleash and unlock the promise in all our people.*' (Cameron, 2012)

As Spohrer's analysis (2012) shows, the policy debate around aspirations was embedded into wider debates about 'removing barriers' and 'creating opportunities' for young people from lower socio-economic background, so they can fulfil their potential. In this discourse, young people are depicted both as 'deficient' – not having high enough aspirations; and as 'victims' - since their circumstances do not allow the realisation of their 'innate potential'. Policies aimed at 'raising aspirations' therefore seemed to be twofold. One the one hand, a number of policy initiatives were introduced to change structures in the education system in order to remove structural barriers to opportunities. For example, the introduction of EMA, improving the vocational offer and investment in apprenticeship can be mentioned here. On the other hand, a range of policy measures were intended to improve attitudes to education and raise the aspiration of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds: such as the Aimhigher initiatives aimed at widening participation in UK higher education. In this discourse, as highlighted many times before, educational success and high aspirations are portrayed as the vehicles of social mobility, the key 'resources' for later life success.

While 'aspirations' are still very much in the focus of education policy, in the last few years, there seemed to be a shift to other attitudinal variables presented as the cure for persistently low levels of upward social mobility in England, including 'character', 'resilience' and 'grit' (Bull and Allen, 2017; Golden, 2017; Spohrer, 2017). The Character and Resilience Manifesto (Paterson, Tyler and Lexmond, 2014) clearly connects these attitudinal variables - vaguely or not defined non-cognitive skills - with the drive for social mobility:

'*Despite concerted efforts, Britain remains a society characterised by glaring discrepancies in the life chances of children from different backgrounds. [...] Taken as a whole, these recommendations are an attempt to place the hard evidence about so-called 'soft' skills at the very heart of the drive to improve social mobility.*' (Paterson, Tyler and Lexmond, 2014:10).

The new discourse on character/ resilience/ grit functions similarly to the discourse on aspirations. Instead of focusing on structural problems as sources of social inequality, in the policy discourse, responsibility for success in life is placed mainly on individuals, the young people themselves: it is up to them to develop the right attitudes and 'character'. Having high aspirations is one of the prescribed 'character traits' necessary for success in education and later life, together with 'bouncebackability', 'employability', 'resilience' and 'grit'.

Youth transitions in policy

The rationale behind these educational policies seems to be that there is a direct correlation between educational achievement and employment outcomes. In this discourse young people are regarded as 'intelligent customers' who will choose the best possible option from the educational offers available to them. This section will focus on three aspects of youth transition policies: changes in career advice and guidance provision and the reforms of the vocational offer.

Career advice

The Coalition government implemented significant changes to the career advice and guidance provision available for young people in secondary education and after. Many commentators argue that the Education Act 2011 introduced the most significant changes in this area in the last 40 years (Andrews, 2016; Moote and Archer, 2017). Until these changes, young people had access to careers support from a national service for almost 40 years. This was delivered locally by the local council and was free of charge to schools (Andrews, 2016). As part of this, The Connexions service was created to help tackling the NEET problem. They provided advice, support and assistance for young people NEET between the ages of 16-19. An evaluation of their services (Maguire and Thompson, 2007) emphasized the importance of positive, open and friendly relationship between young people and their personal advisers. The new legislation however, removed the requirement from local authorities to provide universal career service, at the same time as removing the obligation of schools to provide career education as part of their curriculum. On the other hand, schools were given a statutory duty to offer access to

independent careers advice to all pupils, but without receiving any additional funding for it (Andrews, 2016). The Connexions service was dismantled; its funding that amounted to £200 million per year was withdrawn (Moote and Archer, 2017). In its place a new National Careers Service was introduced in 2012.

Left to their own devices, without funding and with limited regulations, many schools struggled to provide adequate career information, advice and guidance for their students. An Ofsted report from 2013 found that nationally only one in five schools were providing young people with the information, advice and guidance they needed (Ofsted, 2013). The results of another evaluation three years later (Gibson et al., 2015) were only slightly better: according to this study, the statutory duty to secure access to independent careers guidance for pupils aged 12-18 through external professional careers advisers was met by two-thirds of schools. It needs to be mentioned though, that the above number might be too optimistic: the findings were based on voluntary self-reported figures, therefore it is possible that schools with more robust career provision were more likely to engage with the survey. This same survey also found that 16% of schools (self-reported figure) do not provide career education at all through their curriculum. Another survey of 13,421 Year 11 students, aged 15 to 16 years old (Moote and Archer, 2016) concluded that careers education in England is not only patchy, with fluctuating quality of provision, but it is also patterned in ways that might exacerbate inequalities relating to gender, ethnicity and social class. According to this report, career advice is often delivered on a self-referral basis: so students are expected to initiate contact with the designated careers professional. This system however seems to greatly disadvantage those who arguably would need it the most, as working class students, girls, some ethnic minorities and those who are undecided seem to take advantage of this provision the least.

While the Department for Education provides guidance documents (DfE, 2017b) on the principles of careers education, it is argued that schools need further resources to be able to provide valuable, good quality provision for all students (Andrews, 2016).

Vocational education in England

Roberts and Atherton (2011) argue that decades of successive reforms aimed at the vocational path has only created a 'series of blind alleys' - training provisions that carry no value for employers and do not lead to subsequent jobs. To begin with, all types of vocational education paths so far function as a residue category created for the academically less successful young people, carrying a 'second rate' signal for employers. Even more significantly, there is little

connection between the training courses and the labour market. Employers do not have control over the curriculum, and they hardly ever lead to actual employment (Bynner, 2012). In some cases, training provisions directly hinder young people's prospects because they are identified by employers as courses for 'no hopers', for the academic residue (Iles et al., 2008). It has been claimed that vocational education functions as a substitute for the lost employment opportunities for working-class young people (Simmons, Russell and Thompson, 2013).

In English education policy, there seems to be a genuine push to equip young people with in-demand skills through reform of the apprenticeship programme and other vocational offers, on the one hand. However, the pressure on schools to raise attainment at GCSE and A-Level, as well as the renewed policy interest in grammar schools appears to reinforce the privileging of academic qualifications.

Apprenticeships are paid jobs that incorporate on and off job training. A successful apprentice will qualify with a nationally recognised qualification on completion of their contract (Mirza-Davies, 2016). Statistics show that apprenticeships have a high probability to lead to employment. According to the 2011 Census results, 89.4% of 24-35 year olds who completed apprenticeships were employed - the second highest employment rate after those qualified to degree level and above. Despite significant increase in take-up (Skills Funding Agency, 2016), nevertheless, only a small proportion of young people opted for apprenticeships. Although the 2014/15 academic year saw the highest number on record for apprenticeship participation and an increase of 13.5% in apprenticeship starts, still less than 10% of all young learners opt for apprenticeships (DfE, 2015).

In order to increase take-up, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, the British government pledged to increase apprenticeship numbers and funding for them, and at the same time, to improve the quality of the apprenticeship schemes in the country.

Reducing NEET figures

Across the globe, the last three decades have witnessed the expansion of education, with more young people participating in upper secondary and tertiary education than ever before (France, 2016). In these circumstances, academic qualifications are regarded 'as central cultural capital' (2016:85) necessary for successful labour market entry. However, the neo-liberal promise that better qualifications will provide access to well-paid, better quality jobs in the 'knowledge economy' have proven illusory (Wolf, 2002; MacDonald, 2011). Instead, today's young people are facing a precarious labour market which offers limited access and scarce jobs to

inexperienced new entrants. Moreover, young people tend to be concentrated in insecure, short term, poorly paid jobs with little career development opportunities (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Ainley and Allen, 2012; France, 2016).

In an environment of ever-increasing qualification levels and precarious labour market, young people who leave school with low or no qualifications are particularly vulnerable to experience unemployment and periods of being NEET. With this concern in mind, policy-makers seek interventions that would successfully reduce NEET numbers (Hutchinson et al., 2016; Mawn et al., 2017; Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017). Since negative school experiences and educational underachievement are among the main risk factors for becoming NEET (Archambault et al., 2009; Duffy and Elwood, 2013; Furlong, 2006; Janmaat, Hoskins and Franceschelli, 2015), many of these interventions focus on education and training. The UK government has attempted to reduce the number of young NEETs through both education and labour market strategies. Most notably, legislation has, since 2014/15, raised the mandatory participation age in education, training or employment for young people to 18. Under the Raising the Participation Age legislation, between the ages of 16 and 18, young people must participate through either full-time education, a job or volunteering combined with part time study, or by undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide sufficient education and training provision in their area; and identify and monitor those who are not participating. Under the September Guarantee implemented in 2007/08, all 16 and 17 year olds are entitled to a suitable education or training offer. Beyond this age, government policies are focused towards widening participation in higher education, improving the availability and quality of apprenticeships and increasing the level of the National Minimum Wage for under 25s (Hutchinson et al., 2016; Powell, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter described some of the salient elements of the macro-context in which young people in this study are performing their transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives. The first part of the chapter discussed the socio-economic realities of the research location. London is a global city, with a relatively young and highly educated population, with high-performing secondary schools that produce the best GCSE results in the country. It was argued, that these characteristics contribute to the difficulties faced by young people attempting their first move into the labour market. In particular, young people with low or no qualifications

– like participants in this study – are greatly disadvantaged in such a competitive environment, which might explain the high youth unemployment figures in London.

The second part of the chapter provided a brief historical overview of education policies in England, as a background to exploring issues related to social reproduction in education and the emergence of the so-called 'aspiration discourse'. Then, relevant policy initiatives that might have affected young people's transition experiences at the time of my fieldwork were also discussed.

Understanding the local and policy context is crucially important when analyzing how young people construct their aspirations and future plans, then attempt implementing them. Chapter 5-8 will build, to a large extent, on the information presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter aims to situate the present doctoral study in contemporary sociological debates. First some key terms used throughout the thesis will be defined. The next section continues expanding on the idea introduced in Chapter 2 that the 'aspiration discourse' is connected to wider policy debates about social inequalities. The chapter will present recent research evidence on the connections between aspiration and achievement, and the intersections between aspiration, on the one hand, and gender, ethnicity and class, on the other. The last sections will present the theoretical framework of this study.

Definition of terms: 'aspirations', being 'at-risk' and 'youth transition'

Before starting the analysis, I will explain the usage of some of the common terms employed in this study, including the concepts of 'aspirations', being 'at risk' and 'youth transitions'.

The notion of aspirations is widely used in education research and policy alike, embedded in the debate around the persistent link between socio-economic background and educational, economic and social outcomes (Spohrer, 2011). However, as highlighted by Hart (2012) the concept is rarely defined exactly, and is mostly reduced to denote a hope for a future job. This lack of clear definition and reliance on 'common-sense understanding' leads to difficulties in its operationalisation in social research. It also lends itself to being employed as a window-dressing term in policy discourse, part of the policy rhetoric that presents structural problems in terms of individual shortcomings. The role played by aspirations in educational and occupational attainment is especially difficult to measure for a number of reasons: the afore-mentioned lack of clear definition; difficulties of operationalisation; the extreme complexity and interplay of contributing factors to educational/ professional attainment; and the situational/ contextual nature of these factors, among others.

In this thesis, I intend to use the term 'aspirations' in all its complexity, vagueness, and ambiguity: because in lack of one definitive interpretation, all these meanings interplay in the common, everyday usage of the word, but also in its use in policy and research. As a result, the concept of aspirations provides an analytical tool to explore the 'intersection of identities and inequalities within young people's lives' (Archer et al., 2013:8).

Participants in this study were defined as young people 'at-risk of educational underachievement'. As explained before, this doctoral study was embedded in a larger, funded

project that explored ESL, educational underachievement and NEETs. The concept of being 'at risk of educational underachievement' was 'inherited' from the 'mother' project.

The focus of the RESL.eu project were young people at a theoretical risk of leaving school with low or no qualifications. Their theoretical risk was established based on the literature review of the topic, and included various socio-economic, personal and institutional reasons, including low socio-economic background, family poverty, low parental educational level, migrant background and arriving late into the English education system; low previous educational grades; illness and mental health issues; having special educational needs, and so on. Eight of the participating young people were identified through a school survey, which provided information not only about the above variables, but also participants' perceived school engagement and social support as well; both constructs important for educational achievement, according to the literature (Clycq et al., 2017). In addition to these, other sampling criteria were also included. Some participants were already NEET at the time of the first interview, after leaving school with low qualifications, below the 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and math benchmark that is considered the minimum acceptable standard of qualifications. In addition, young people attending FE courses and apprenticeships were also included in the study. Vocational education in England is still considered a 'second best' option for those young people who cannot or do not want to pursue academic studies (Brockmann, Clarke Winch, 2010). Therefore vocational courses were included in their capacity of 'a social inclusion route for the disadvantaged', a 'provider of last resort for those whom other forms of learning have failed' (Keep, 2015:473). The methodology chapter will describe in more detail how participants were selected for the RESL.eu project, and what sampling criteria were employed specifically for my doctoral study.

In this thesis, I will employ the term 'youth transition' as an analytic tool to capture the period that starts at the end of compulsory education, and ideally finishes when finding stable employment. The difficulty to even delineate this period for definition's sake can already suggest that the concept itself is not without controversy (Furlong, 2009). The term 'youth transitions' seems to suggests a linear, unproblematic process between two endpoints, and as such, tends to conceal the non-linear nature of this process, and the precarious, unpredictable and permeable pathways young people are taking in the present socio-economic context. As explained earlier, 'youth transitions' nowadays rarely follow the ideal type trajectory, instead the majority of young people experience 'churning' between training courses, apprenticeships,

precarious and low paid employment and periods of being NEET (Furlong, 2006; McDonalds, 2011; Roberts, K., 2009; Roberts S., 2011; Vickerstaff, 2003).

While acknowledging the problematic and simplistic nature of the term (Furlong, 2009), I decided upon using it in this thesis, not necessarily due to the concept's analytical prowess, but in order to position this study in a specific research tradition (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). The concept of transition has a long history, and according to Cieslik and Simpson, it is one of the 'the most prominent and important concepts in the context of youth studies' (2013:8). Andy Furlong identifies two broad research traditions in youth studies, the so-called 'transitional' and 'cultural approaches' (2013:5). The latter perspectives tend to focus on lifestyles and youth culture (which will not be discussed in this thesis). Although the 'transitional' research tradition can embrace a wide variety of topics, the focus in this research paradigm is on the relationship between education and employment, the so-called 'school-to-work' transitions in Western (de)industrialised societies. The 'youth phase' is socially constructed, different cultures, at different times of their history have defined the term in different ways (Furlong, 2013). It is difficult to define it through exact chronological markers and activities, and it is usually used to represent the period in young people's lives that happens between childhood and adulthood - an admittedly vaguely defined life stage. As such, this research tradition includes studies on education and training, youth employment and unemployment, housing situation and homelessness, social class, gender and ethnicity, and studies on the role of agency and structure on young people's lives (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013). Through this, studies in this tradition tend to focus on the reproduction of social inequalities 'as part of the transition from youth to adulthood' (Furlong, 2013:5). My research has deep affinities with this approach, therefore the term 'youth transitions' will be used in this thesis.

While there are many critics of the term due to the large-scale transformation of the socio-economic context and increased complexity of choices and trajectories (Furlong, 2009; Brooks, 2009), Shildrick and MacDonald highlight its usefulness too: '*the appeal of a broad holistic, long view of youth transition is that it offers a privileged vantage point from which to glimpse processes of social and structural formation and transformation*' (2007:601).

Situating the study in contemporary policy and academic debates

As argued in the previous chapters, the notion of 'aspirations' is embedded in the policy debates around the persistent link between socio-economic background and educational, economic and social outcomes, and declining social mobility in Britain (Spohrer, 2011; Berrington et al.,

2016). In this discourse, people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly portrayed as having 'low' aspirations. Lower academic attainment and participation in education and labour market activities is then attributed to this presumed lack of aspirations of working class pupils (Spohrer, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Baker et al., 2014; Berrington et al., 2016). In this policy discourse, raising disadvantaged young people's (and their families') aspirations became the main mechanism of tackling social disadvantage, realising upward social mobility and through this, achieving greater economic prosperity (Spohrer, 2012).

There is growing research evidence from the UK that social class still shapes the educational experiences and outcomes of young people (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 2006; Reay, 2001; 2006; Reay and Ball, 1997; Reay and Lucey, 2000; Whitty, 2001). Over the past decades, social mobility has been declining in the UK (Reay, 2006): over a decade ago Reay found that middle-class children had a 50% greater chance to stay in education after 16 than their working-class peers. While in the academic year 2014-15, close to half of 18 and 19 year olds were admitted to university in the UK (Wolf, Domínguez-Reig, and Sellen, 2016), young people from working class backgrounds still are underrepresented at elite universities, and tend to attend local higher education institutions, often post-1992 universities. Duckworth and Schoon (2012) found a direct relationship between the number of risk factors experienced and the likelihood of young people becoming and remaining NEET. Alarmingly, this relationship has increased over the last few decades: compared to earlier generations, young people from deprived backgrounds nowadays experience more adverse educational and labour market outcomes.

The contemporary youth labour market seems comprised of a disappearing middle segment (Roberts, 2011); a graduate route, which is becoming more expensive, without offering worthy wage differentials and stable employment (especially for working-class graduates – see MacDonald, 2011); and a precarious, low wage, low stability segment at the bottom. Unemployment, underemployment and 'limited opportunity structures' (Roberts, 2009) seem to characterise the whole youth labour market, which questions the efficiency, even the validity of supply side youth policy initiates. Raising qualification levels without increasing the number and quality of available jobs only shifts the boundaries of disadvantage (MacDonald, 2011).

In the context of growing inequalities and diminishing social mobility in today's British society (Schoon et al., 2004; Thomson, Henderson and Holland, 2003), the education system seems to reinforce and reproduce social class differences, instead of being a vehicle of social mobility

(Reay, 2006). In spite of this, young people tend to interpret social inequalities in individualised terms of personal failure (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Pless, 2014), aligning with the official discourse on personal choice and responsibility. Opposed to official discourses of low aspirations – the so-called 'myth of low aspirations' (Finlay et al., 2010) - empirical studies have found that young people from traditional working-class background are seriously committed to (finding) work (Simmons and Thompson, 2011), albeit with different employment aspirations than their middle-class peers. Not low aspirations but lower expectations and different opportunity structures characterise this group, for which traditional orientations towards work and education are still dominant (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2008). As Roberts pointed out (2009), working-class young people in fact are more ambitious than their more advantaged counterparts, taking into account their economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged position. From this starting point, fulfilling higher aspirations requires higher and riskier investment, as their 'choices' are bounded by structural inequalities (Ball et al., 1996; Evans, 2007; Reay, 2001). In this context, opting out from education to pursue vocational routes might be a common-sense choice: doing so they are able to tap into the social and cultural capital of their own communities. Analysing critical moments in young people's transition to adulthood, Thomson and colleagues (2002) reach the conclusion that "a 'can do' approach to life" is not enough to overcome structural constraints.

While a number of studies found evidence that aspirations (the students' own and parental aspirations) are among the leading predictors of educational attainment and future success (Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman, 2011; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012), other papers highlight that virtually all groups of students – whether from deprived or non-deprived background, and from different ethnic groups – have high aspirations for the future (Sinclair, Kendrick and Scott, 2010; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). Therefore while aspirations do seem to be important in educational outcomes, they are not the only factors that need to be explored. Furthermore, the structural and contextual definition given by St Clair and Benjamin (2011) that aspirations are '*a compromise between the desired and the possible'* (2011:505) can further explain this apparent contradiction: aspirations might not be clearly defined for the individuals themselves, but located on an ever-changing spectrum between the desired and the possible. Different people might also interpret it differently: as being closer to one or the other end of the spectrum. In addition, while the 'desired' might be similar for many young people, the realm of the possible might be starkly different for those coming from different socio-economic backgrounds; and high aspirations alone are not enough for overcoming socio-economic risk

factors (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Kintrea, St Clair and Houston, 2011). Some meta-studies and intervention evaluations even question the link between aspirations (and other attitudinal and behavioural components and intervention measures directed at them) and educational outcomes (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012).

Since academic research does not seem to support the above-mentioned deficit model that presumes a lack of aspirations from young people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, it can be argued that the discourse based on the 'poverty of aspirations' functions as a discursive strategy of misdirection in the current policy discourse (Spohrer, 2011). Through it, attention is focused entirely on the supply-side of labour – on the young people themselves, emphasizing individual 'employability' and 'lack of aspirations'. These are presented as personal attributes, with little acknowledgement of the structural limitations of the labour market, better reflected by terms such as 'youth unemployment' (Spohrer, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). This way, attention is drawn away from economic problems such as socio-economic inequality and a large percentage of insecure, low-paid jobs in the labour market (Keep and James, 2012). Through this discourse, youth unemployment, underemployment and a large percentage of young people experiencing periods of being NEET are redefined as 'aspirational/ motivational problems' - shifting responsibility from the state to the individual (Wright, 2012). In line with this rationale, advocating for ever increasing educational qualifications and supply-side interventions such as educational measures, employability and NEET programmes, are presented as the solution to the above mentioned problems of youth unemployment and NEETs. However, Hannan et al. (1995:342) pointed out already more than two decades ago:

> '*None of these problems can be addressed through educational programmes. They require changes in attitudes and social behaviour on the part of employers. Until this is recognised in public policy, the educational systems are likely to be faced with insatiable demands to eliminate an 'early leaving' problem which, of its nature, is ever being created anew in the labour market.*'

Aspirations and achievement

In the literature, there seems to be a consensus that high educational and career aspirations correlate with later academic and career success (Clausen, 1993; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Schoon, 2006; 2007; Schoon, Martin, and Ross, 2007; Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman, 2011; Schoon and Polek, 2011; Duckworth and Schoon 2012). In addition, research also indicates that lower socio-economic status (low SES) children tend to have lower educational

aspirations than their more advantaged peers (Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Willitts et al., 2005; Schoon, 2006; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Baker et al., 2014; Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman 2011; Rothon et al., 2011; Strand, 2011; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; McCulloch, 2017).

Assuming a causal link between aspirations and later life outcomes, for the last two decades, 'raising aspirations' became a central concern in British education and youth policy (Spohrer, 2012). In this discourse, young people from lower socio-economic background are depicted both as 'deficient' – not having high enough aspirations; and as 'victims' - since their circumstances do not allow the realisation of their 'innate potential' (Spohrer, 2012). Therefore, a number of policy initiatives were introduced to change structures in the education system in order to remove structural barriers to opportunities, as discussed in Chapter 2. For example, the introduction of EMA, improving the vocational offer and investment in apprenticeship can be mentioned here. On the other hand, a range of policy measures were intended to improve attitudes to education and raise the aspiration of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds: such as the Aimhigher initiatives aimed at widening participation in UK higher education. In this discourse, educational success and high aspirations are portrayed as the vehicles of social mobility, the key 'resources' for later life success.

Challenging these policy assumptions, a number of studies explored the question whether aspirations can be used to raise academic attainment (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Goodman, Gregg and Washbrook, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Strand, 2011; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; Gutman and Schoon, 2012; Rose and Baird, 2013; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013). The majority of these concluded that there is inconclusive evidence for a causal relationship between raising aspirations and improving school achievement, as students from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds can develop high educational and occupational aspirations without those being reflected in present and future achievement (Hanson, 1994; Goodman, Gregg and Washbrook, 2011; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Cummings et al., 2012; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Baker et al., 2014; Khattab, 2015).

While several studies question the assumption among policy makers that raising aspirations, on their own, will enhance educational achievement, research evidence suggests that aspirations and school achievement influence each other (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Khattab, 2015). Aspirations seem to predict achievement, even after controlling for background factors,

such as family background, parental aspirations and prior attainment (Schoon, 2006; Strand, 2007). A study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Goodman and Gregg, 2010) which analysed four large-scale datasets also found that both children's and parents 'aspirations and expectations were powerfully related to outcomes. Khattab (2015) argues that both aspirations and expectations should be taken into account. Based on data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), he found that having either high aspirations or high expectations seems to positively influence school achievement; while complete alignment between high aspirations, high expectations and high achievement is the most important predictor for future educational behaviour among students.

There are relatively few longitudinal studies on aspirations, which make it difficult to ascertain how aspirations at different age relate to educational outcomes. In one study which used data from the LSYPE to examine the variation in young people's aspirations over time, Croll and Attwood (2013) showed that although a majority of young people (68%) aspired to go to university at age 14, only 40% had been accepted by age 20. Young people from less well-off families were more likely to have revised their aspirations downwards over time than those from better-off families, pointing to the importance of structural factors on aspirations and achievement.

Aspirations are influenced by a large number of complex and inter-related factors, including family, neighbourhood, peer-group, schools, and social/identity factors such as class and ethnicity (Furlong and Biggart, 1999; MacLeod, 2009). Recent work suggests that aspirations can be viewed as an interaction of structural and individual influences (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick, 2010). The lower educational aspirations of young people from low SES may simply reflect lower expectations of achievement, based on previous experiences (Devine, 1998; McCulloch, 2016). In addition, young people from better-off homes have greater access to material and financial resources and educational opportunities. Socialisation processes such as role models, occupational knowledge, and informal kinship/social networks may also explain socio-economic differences in aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

On the other hand, several studies challenge the 'myth of low aspirations' of low SES young people (Finlay et al., 2010; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Sinclair, Kendrick and Scott, 2010; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; Rose and Baird, 2013; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Baker et al., 2014). St Clair and colleagues (2013) demonstrate that that the aspirations of young people from areas with significant deprivation already exceed

what the labour market can support. While they may be lower than in more privileged contexts, they cannot be considered as absolutely low. Also, the 'aspirations gap' may not manifest in the level of ambition in different communities as much as the knowledge of how to make aspirations into reality (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013).

A recent study based on data from wave one of the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) (Berrington et al., 2016) also found that contrary to political rhetoric, young people's aspirations for college/university participation are high: 66% of 10–15 year olds stated positive aspirations for college/university, which is a larger proportion than actually participate. For disadvantaged young people, the realisation of their aspirations may be more difficult than for their more advantaged peers (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Hanson, 1994). Based on LSYPE, McCulloch (2017) found that young people from higher SES had more stable aspirations over time, and differences in educational achievement between young people whose aspirations followed different trajectories widened over time. The aspiration and achievement trajectories were shaped by processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage (Di Prete and Eirich, 2006): advantages tend to be reinforced and accumulate for high SES young people, while those from low SES families experience further disadvantage. In consequence, relatively small initial advantages between children from different backgrounds lead to large gaps in attainment at later ages.

Berrington and colleagues (2016) found that despite overall high levels of aspiration, there are significant differences by gender, ethnicity and class, with higher aspirations found among girls, teenagers from professional and managerial backgrounds and teenagers from non-White ethnic groups. Numerous studies have found that girls have consistently higher educational aspirations than boys, within all ethnic backgrounds (Willitts et al., 2005; Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Berrington et al., 2016). However, the size of the gender gap differs by socio-economic background and ethnicity, reflecting complex interactions between individual characteristics and context (Bhopal, 2014; Schoon and Eccles, 2014). The gender difference is largest among White teenagers (Berrington et al. 2016).

In contrast to earlier research which highlighted low aspirations of Black-Caribbean boys (Francis and Skelton, 2005) and those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin (Plewis, 2011); nowadays aspirations are highest for Black-Caribbean, Black-African, Indian and Bangladeshi teenagers. Recently, White working class pupils became the lowest performing group in the British education system, especially boys (Strand, 2007; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Tackey,

Barnes and Khambhaita, 2011; Strand, 2014), and they have the lowest aspirations too (Berrington et al., 2016). Therefore much attention has been focused on the 'falling behind' of White working class boys (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). The high aspirations of Black African and Asian groups are partially explained by a strong academic self-concept, whereas the low aspirations of White British pupils related to a generally poor academic self-concept (Strand and Winston, 2008; Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

It has been argued that children from minority ethnic groups can take advantage of 'family norms, values and networks, as well as a broader set of community values and networks which promote particular educational goals' (Shah, Bindi and Modood , 2010:1112). According to Modood (2004) and Modood and Khattab (2015) 'ethnic capitals' can be used to foster high ambitions and to enforce appropriate educational engagement. Strand (2014a) also found greater educational resilience and positive academic self-concept among ethnic minority pupils (for instance, completion of homework and lack of truancy). A number of studies (Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman, 2011; Khattab, 2015; Berrington et al, 2016) showed that parental educational attitudes and expectations were a key mediating factor in ethnic minority group aspirations and expectations. Similarly, the 'immigrant paradigm' thesis (Kao and Thompson, 2003; Strand, 2014; Crawford and Greaves, 2015) emphasises migrants' tendency to put greater emphasis on education as a route to social mobility.

Berrington et al (2016) found that parents of minority ethnic children had more positive educational aspirations and higher school engagement. Nevertheless, even after controlling for these differences in parental attitude and behaviour, White teenagers continued to have lower educational aspirations suggesting that there are other, unobserved differences between ethnic minority groups.

A recent report exploring the underrepresentation of White working class boys in higher education (Baars, Mulcahy and Bernardes, 2016) listed a number of factors that contribute to these negative outcomes, including lower prior educational achievement, financial barriers – not only the initial cost and aversion to debt, but more importantly, uncertainty about the return on the investment of going to university. In addition, aspirations and expectations, along with cultural capital, values and perceptions (access to role models and information; preference for informal sources of information; negative perceptions of higher education) are listed among the most relevant factors in White working class boys' reluctance to embark on a university degree.

As briefly summarised above, there is a vast literature on young people's aspirations, and how this correlates with achievement and later life outcomes, as well as socio-economic background variables. However, the literature does not provide sufficient explanation on the processes and mechanism leading to low aspirations and subsequent low achievement. As also highlighted by Baars, Mulcahy and Bernardes (2016:14), research does not seem to draw conclusions on the causes of low aspirations among White working class young people in the British society and education system, comparative to other ethnic and socio-economic groups.

Research suggests that focusing on raising aspirations alone will not, on its own, reduce class, gender and ethnic differences in academic attainment and HE participation (e.g. St Clair et al, 2013; Khattab, 2015; Berrington et al., 2017). It is argued that high aspirations should be reinforced by more concrete support, equipping the students, particularly those coming from poor and disadvantaged families, with the necessary skills, addressing their learning needs and improving the information and the opportunities they receive. St Clair and colleagues (2013) also highlight that action to address the vocational and educational trajectories of young people needs to be tailored to the specifics of the context and focused on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of outcomes.

Aspirations and neoliberal subjectivities

There is vast amount of research on the various socio-economic determinants of aspirations (see Gutman and Akerman, 2008; St Clair and Benjamin, 2013). However, much less attention has been paid to how young people themselves make sense of their aspirations, what they think are the best criteria for defining these and how they intend to implement them.

Franceschelli and Keating (2018) found that overall, even after the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent austerity politics, young people in England are optimistic about their future: those from more privileged background were perhaps aware of their advantage; while disadvantaged young people tend to place their faith in the future, as an 'anchor of hope'. For them, being optimistic functioned as a coping strategy in face of adversity.

This positive attitude is intrinsically connected to young people's trust in the power of their own agency, specifically hard work. There seems to be widespread consensus among today's youth, that working hard is the best – if not the only- strategy to achieve their goals (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018; Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015). Mendick and colleagues noted, that attitudes towards hard work and achievement seem to be shifting. While even a decade ago, young people seemed to have valued 'effortless achievement' above all (Archer

and Francis, 2007; Jackson, 2006), nowadays the faith in the 'transformative power of hard work' (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018) is accepted by young people regardless of educational trajectory, gender or class. The disconnect between the challenging socio-economic context and young people's generally positive attitudes have been conceptualised through the notions of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) and 'epistemological fallacy' (Furlong and Cartmel,1997; 2007).

While optimistic dispositions and opting for hard work as a strategy to achieve aspirations are usually considered a positive development. Mendick and colleagues (2015) noted that the discourse on hard work is embedded into neoliberal conceptions of meritocracy (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015) where agents have equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their background. Consequently, if success in education and the labour market is solely determined by individual effort, failure becomes a result of personal pathologies only, of not working hard enough, instead of being shaped by social inequalities (Tyler, 2013). Academic under-attainment, unemployment and being NEET are thus re-interpreted in terms of individual failure, putting the responsibility solely on the shoulders of the young people (Pless, 2014), in accordance with neoliberal ideologies.

Tokumitsu (2014, 2015) also emphasized that superficially positive messages about work are being adopted by neoliberal discourses. She argues that the '*do what you love (DWYL)'* for career became '*the unofficial work mantra for our time'* (2014). However, reclassifying work as love or pleasure, obscures the sacrifices made by workers and devalues labour that is performed out of different motivations. Thus it hides from people the actual amount and extent of their work, giving opportunity to exploitative practices.

I argue that it is important to have better insight into young people's beliefs, attitudes and values, as these shape the decisions and choices they make.

Aspirations and capitals

While a great deal of research has been conducted into the factors that shape aspirations, one gap in youth studies is the evaluation of the complex interplay between various measures. The next paragraphs will attempt to present a dynamic, agentic model informed by Bourdieu's concept of social, cultural and economic capital, to provide an explanatory framework bringing together the dynamic interplay of factors at macro, meso and micro dimension (Bourdieu, 1985). This framework navigates the interactive relationship between structure and agency to avoid over- or under-socialisation explanations. It allows to explore the systematic and

persistent class inequalities while recognizing individual and family agency in mobilizing and utilizing various resources through meso level opportunity structures, such as family networks, connections at school and college, peer groups, community/ faith organisations, supplementary schools, bridging and linking social capital. While recognizing the constraints of young people's socio-economic situation, this model focuses on the ways that social and cultural capital can be utilized in different social fields in order to successfully navigate the education system and transition to the labour market.

The reproduction of existing class differences and the role played by the education system in this process are at the centre of Bourdieu's theory. Schools play a fundamental role in preserving social privilege through penalising working class cultural traits, and rewarding the culture of those from the higher end of the social hierarchy. Bourdieu (1984, 1990) describes the role of taste and disposition, of acquired 'cultural competence' in the reproduction of class inequalities. Children from advantaged backgrounds internalise desirable personality traits and behaviours, language codes and cultural knowledge at home that are highly valued in school. As a result, they gain early advantage through schooling, while working-class children feel alienated in an education system that denies their own cultural traits. They face an unequal battle with their more advantaged peers.

The processes and mechanisms through which dominant classes impose their own class-specific norms, behaviours and systems of meaning on society, presenting these as 'natural', has been conceptualised as 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1990; 2000). Symbolic violence, thus, functions as a mode of domination, as a tool of legitimising and preserving structures of inequality. As such, it is often unrecognised, and the dominated lack the power to formulate effective actions to overcome their own subjugation. For example, the education system, school culture and curriculum is largely based on the values and culture of the middle classes, and as such, it operates to preserve their dominant status in society. Working class children can feel alienated in such an environment, where their own class-culture is designated as inferior, creating the condition of working class failure in education (Ingram, 2009; 2010; 2011).

While Bourdieu's theory emphasizes social reproduction, it also recognises the agentic power of the acting individual through the concepts of habitus and social field. The various forms of social and cultural capital influence academic performance and the decision whether to continue in education through the mediating effect of habitus: by altering students' opinion of their own academic abilities and the value of education in their life. Young people therefore

have some control, agency, over how to negotiate the outcomes, as do their families and the schools that they attend.

The concept of social capital has gained popularity in contemporary political discourse, which tries to operationalise it as a magic cure for a range of social ailments; educational underachievement among them. Regarding young people, research framed by social capital theory has focused mainly on educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Morrow, 2001; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004; Stevens et al., 2007) and school-to-work transitions (Helve and Bynner, 2007; Raffo and Reeves, 2000).

Holland (2009) differentiates two strands in the sociological research of social capital, as present in youth studies. The first strand conceptualises social capital in terms of collective action and integration, in the tradition of Coleman, Putnam and Fukuyama, focusing on social networks based on trust, reciprocity and civic participation. In this strand, young people are of interest mainly as recipients of their families' social and cultural capital. The second strand of social capital theorising uses a social justice and inequality perspective, following Bourdieu (1977). The typology of various forms of capitals proposed by him provide a theoretical framework that can be operationalised effectively in explaining the dynamics and aggregate impact of various risk factors and protective measures. As highlighted by Bassani (2007), one gap in youth studies is the evaluation of the complex interplays between individual measures.

Social capital however cannot be conceptualized as intrinsically positive. The quality of social capital and its influence on aspirations depends on the nature of the relationships that constitute it. From a different perspective, whether social capital is considered negative or positive depends on the match between the values present in that social network and the social field where it is deployed (Allard, 2005).

The potential negative aspects of social capital can be captured and explained through the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital, developed by Coleman (1988). Bonding social capital is found in homogeneous groups of family and close friends, and links individuals on a horizontal level. Bonding ties tend to be strong and inward-looking, reinforcing group identities, but excluding others (Holland, 2009; Ryan L, 2011). Bridging can link on both horizontal and vertical level; it is usually found in formal and informal networks between socio-economically different groups or people. These ties are weaker then bonding links (Ryan L, 2011), but they are considered more advantageous: while bonding social capital is mainly used to 'get by' in life; bridging capital enables individuals to 'get ahead' (Putnam, 2000).

Several research studies completed among socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Holland, 2009; Webster et al., 2004) found that young people had access to rich social capital, contrary to official discourses. However, this was of the bonding nature: strong ties with extended families and close friends. These networks provided invaluable resources of emotional and financial support, access to childcare and local employment opportunities. They were founded on trust and reciprocity, and young people were conscious and highly appreciative of their value. On the other hand though, these very strong ties can entrap aspiring young people in their local surroundings, hindering their educational and employment opportunities. They enabled the development of strong local identities, many times defined in terms of marginality, criminality, drug-use and anti-education attitude, which could seriously limit the education and employment horizons of young people (Morrow, 2001). Even in their less sinister manifestation, obligations of reciprocity and loyalty characteristic of strong bonding ties, can hold back individuals.

In contrast, bridging social capital[21] provides connections with socio-economically dissimilar groups, providing access to social, cultural and symbolic capital unavailable in their immediate environment. Some studies indicate that deprived communities lack this type of social capital, which explains and reproduces their social exclusion (Holland, 2009).

Then again, young people have some control on how to negotiate the outcomes of different forms of social capital. A study among secondary school students discovered that many young people were able to use bonding ties with close friends and siblings as a base to bridge out into new relationships (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007).

Just as developing positive social capital can improve educational outcomes, investment in cultural capital has positive impact on school performance too. Bourdieu (1985) argued that cultural capital plays a fundamental role in passing down social privilege from one generation to the next, thus in the preservation, recreation and legitimisation of social inequalities. Children growing up at the higher end of social hierarchy internalise tastes and dispositions, and gain specific cultural knowledge that is highly valued in society. Since the education system recognizes as valid only this type of cultural capital, they gain early advantage through

[21] The distinction between the two concepts is not always clear: the strong ties of ethnic minorities with their extended families and home communities can act as both bonding and bridging capital, as found by Holland (2009) among African Caribbean communities. For a more detailed discussion on the problematic nature of the simplistic dichotomy of bonding and bridging capitals see Ryan L, 2011.

schooling. Working-class children, who do not have access to it, feel alienated in an education system that denies their own cultural capital. They face an unequal battle with their more advantaged peers.

Reay (2004) described how middle-class mothers are better positioned to draw on their cultural capital to support their children's education. The main factors of their cultural capital are their confidence in and knowledge of the educational system; aspects which are not readily available for working-class mothers. As demonstrated by Gaddis (2012), cultural capital[22] positively influences the academic performance of disadvantaged youth through the mediating effect of habitus: by altering students' opinion on their own academic abilities and the value of education in their life.

As mentioned earlier, individual and family related factors, such as academic performance, academic expectations and aspirations (both parental and the students' own) are highly correlated with successful completion of secondary education (Archambault et al., 2009; Fall and Roberts, 2012; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012). Using Bourdieu's definition of embodied cultural capital as 'the long lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (1985:4), aspirations and expectations are an essential feature of cultural capital. Thus increasing cultural capital has a positive effect on school completion and aspirations too.

It can be argued that increase in social capital (not only cultural capital) can alter young 'people's habitus, which in turn will have better or looser fit with the culture of their school or work. Through increased positive social capital, young people' can develop new, higher aspirations and discover resources which might help them succeed.

Aspirations and *illusio*

The Bourdieusian concept of *illusio* provides a useful conceptual tool to explore how young people orient themselves towards the world of work, a specific profession or occupation. Bourdieu described illusio as '*what gives 'sense' (both meaning and direction) to existence by leading one to invest in a game*' (Bourdieu, 2000: 207) – a concept that seems to lend itself to the study of motivations and aspirations. It refers to the belief that a 'game' is worth playing, and the phenomenon of being '*taken in and by the game*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 116) in a field where actors compete for success. According to Bourdieu, a social field is '*a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions*

[22] In this quantitative study measured by participation in 'high-art', such as museum visits, attending plays, time spent reading.

that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents' (Hilgers and Mangez, 2015: 5). Actors in the field are defined by their relative positions, which in turn are determined by interactions between their habitus and the field, and their access to unequally distributed capitals.

Bourdieu argued that '*Every social field, whether the scientific field, the artistic field, the bureaucratic field, or the political field, tends to require those entering it to have the relationship to the field that I call illusio'* (Bourdieu, 1998:78). Illusio in a field is a '*shared sense of purpose*' (Threadgold, 2019:43), which the individual internalises though investing themselves. As such, *illusio* is '*illusion or 'diversion' only for someone who perceives the game from the outside"* (Bourdieu, 2000:151).

So *illusio* can be understood as the amalgam of collective meanings and values connected to specific fields that attract and (often) bind individuals to that field. From the individual's perspective, *illusio* constitutes the belief in the significance of the game played, and their investment into that game. The constructed nature of *ilussio* is rarely recognized as it presents itself as natural, commonsensical.

With regards to the topic of my thesis, it is important to highlight that the term 'game' is used in a Bourdieusian sense, as a metaphor for the social practices that define a field. The 'game' of transitioning from education to employment, constructing and working toward achieving one's aspirations are, of course, deeply serious issues.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to situate the concept of aspirations into wider policy and academic debates. Research evidence was presented on the connections between aspirations and achievement, on the one hand, and aspirations and different socio-demographic variables, on the other. This thesis draws on Bourdieu's 'analytical toolkit' including the theory of capitals and the concept of illusio to provide a more holistic understanding of the processes and mechanisms that shape young people' aspirations. This conceptual tools will be used throughout the analytical chapters (Chapters 6-8).

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological approach employed in conducting this doctoral research study, and considers the theoretical underpinnings of the methods used. It starts with a detailed description of the research design and the rationale behind it. It explains the reason for choosing London as the research location; the sampling strategy adopted; and provides a detailed outline of the stages of data collection. Then issues of participant recruitment are described.

The following section discusses the research methods employed and issues related to qualitative interviewing. Following on from this, I will discuss the ethical considerations and dilemmas that arose during the study, providing personal reflections on conducting this research study. The chapter will conclude with explaining the data analysis process and the development of the coding frame, as part of the analytical process.

Research design

One of the main objectives of my doctoral study was to gain insight into the decision making process through which young people choose an educational pathway, develop their occupational aspirations and embark (or not) on a transition trajectory to realise their aspirations. In particular, I was interested in a specific group of young people: those who are at risk of finishing their education with low or no qualifications. According to the literature on youth transitions and supported by statistics, educational under-attainment is one of the main risk factors in becoming NEET later on, with high potential of leading to problematic transitions from education to employment (France, 2016; Furlong, 2006; Kaye et al., 2014; Mirza-Davies, 2015). The aim of my study was to explore how these young people - identified as being at risk of educational under-attainment and difficult transitions - make sense of the risks and opportunities, structural constraints, resources available to them and their own agency during their transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives. Given the complexity of the subject matter, dealing mostly with opinions, perceptions, beliefs and expectations, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate strategy to research this topic, due to its exploratory power and capacity to provide a more profound, personal and authentic insight into the issues and views investigated (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2013).

The study aimed to understand the construction of aspirations and strategies of implementation from the participants' own perspective. Qualitative research is particularly adept in exploring micro-level phenomena in their everyday settings, through the subjective meanings constructed by research participants (Flick, 2009). '*A focus on people's thoughts, processes, meanings, and experiences'* (Given, 2015:2) is considered a defining feature of qualitative research, together with a '*focus on participants' voices'* and '*embracing of context surrounding participants' experiences'* (Given, 2015:3). Because of this, I decided to adopt a qualitative approach.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the concept of 'aspirations' was employed as an analytical tool to explore the '*intersection of identities and inequalities within young people's lives'* (Archer et al., 2013:8). Individual interviews with young people themselves seemed to provide the most adequate method to investigate this. I felt that semi-structured interviews provided a powerful methodological tool to investigate in depth young people's personal stories, feelings and perspectives. In addition, the interview setting provided the time and intimacy necessary for exploring these young people's innermost desires about their future, their fears and experiences.

Fieldwork for my doctoral study was completed in London[23], over a two year period between November 2014 and October 2016. Altogether, 15 young people were included in this research. The participant sampling criteria was quite complex and it will be explained in detail in the following sections. In a nutshell, participants were selected based on their theoretical risk of low educational attainment, as defined by the RESL.eu project's theoretical and methodological framework (see Clycq et al., 2014; Clycq et al., 2017).

All participants were interviewed twice over the two year period of the fieldwork. Employing a longitudinal design, I was able to follow their trajectories from the end of compulsory education to further or higher education, employment or something else, respectively, over a relatively extended period of time. This research design allowed time and opportunity to understand young people's 'aspirations' not as a fixed, unalterable goal, but more as a 'guiding principle' and a dynamic process, changing through time, depending on and reflecting the changes in young people's personal circumstances, as well as in the political and socio-economic environment. I was also able to track how participants' educational and occupational

[23] The rationale for choosing London as the research setting will be explained in the next section.

plans had played out, and how young people interpreted their own 'successful' or 'less successful' transitions.

The present PhD study was embedded into a larger research project, RESL.eu, funded by the European Commission (2013-2018), as explained in more detail in the introductory chapter. All data used for writing this dissertation was collected as part of the RESL.eu project. While the RESL.eu project's research design and the methods determined, to a large extent, the methodological framework of my doctoral study, the specific research questions asked and the topics investigated in this thesis are independent from RESL.eu; and the data analysis conducted provides new contribution distinct from the RESL.eu project.

Research setting

As explained in the Introduction, the RESL.eu project had specific guidelines on how to identify, for each of the participating countries, two research areas in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the region, and their youth unemployment and ESL rates (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015). Based on these criteria, two research areas were selected in England: London and the Tyne and Wear metropolitan county in the North East of England. While both areas were involved in the quantitative data collection required for the RESL.eu project, qualitative data was collected in London[24], following the project guidelines.

Thus, the RESL.eu project provided an opportunity to explore young people's aspirations and their strategies to achieve those aspirations in a unique setting. London offers distinctive and contradictory opportunity structures. On the one hand, the city seems to provide abundant educational and occupational opportunities, with several world-class universities, a long list of FE colleges and other educational establishments being available. Starting in the New Labour era, the quality of London schools had been transformed (Whitty and Anders, 2012), with London pupils now performing better at all ages and levels than the rest of the country (Wyness, 2011). According to a report by the independent think-tank Social Market Foundation (2016), London has experienced dramatic improvements in educational attainment level and pupils here achieve the best GCSE results from all English regions, with over 70% of them attaining at least five good GCSEs.

[24] While qualitative data collection was primarily conducted in London, a number of interviews and focus groups with local policy makers were also conducted in Tyne and Wear, as part of the policy work package (WP2), separately from the qualitative data collection completed under WP4.

While educational opportunities in London compare favourably to the rest of the country, youth unemployment levels, on the other hand, tend to be higher than in other English regions. At the start of this research project, London had the second highest youth unemployment rates for 16-24 year olds in England, with 26.5% of young people in the capital being unemployed[25] (ONS, 2013b). Statistics from the Labour Force Survey show that London, for the last two decades, has had higher youth unemployment level than the rest of the country, at rates significantly higher than that of the adult population, those over 25 years of age (see Figure 3, Chapter 2). Data suggests that youth unemployment rates in London and the rest of the country started to converge during the lifetime of the project, but both stayed much higher than adult unemployment rates (Aldridge et al., 2015).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, official policy discourses tend to assume a direct causal relationship between increased educational achievement and better employment outcomes (Wolf, 2002). However, as these figures suggest, the relationship between educational attainment and employment outcomes is more unpredictable and complex, influenced by a multitude of factors, in addition to academic achievement (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015). Crucially, the local labour market is also important. Moreover, on an aggregate level, education outcome levels in a specific region cannot be translated directly into (un)employment figures, due to mobility and migration: for instance, youth unemployment figures also include young people whose education was completed elsewhere. Therefore the discrepancy in London between the excellent educational opportunities and high youth unemployment provides a unique opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of structural, institutional and individual factors in realising one's aspirations, which challenge simplistic policy assumptions.

Participant sampling strategy

In this study, I aimed to explore the experiences, perspectives and aspirations of young Londoners with a specific profile: young people at risk of leaving education with inadequate qualifications[26] for today's demanding labour market, who, therefore, might experience difficult transitions after leaving compulsory education, as explained in the introductory

[25] Between June and August 2013, the North East of England had the highest youth unemployment rates in England: 28.6% for 16-24 year olds and 26.1% for 18-24 year olds (ONS, 2013b). These areas were selected for the RESL.eu project precisely for having the two highest youth unemployment rates in the country.

[26] The benchmark of satisfactory minimum qualifications was set at 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths, as it is commonly accepted in the UK.

chapter. My PhD research only included young people who were interviewed through RESL.eu, hence this selection criterion was 'inherited' from the that project's sampling strategy.

Participant sampling for my doctoral study was completed in two phases. First, a number of potential participants were selected for the broader RESL.eu project. Then, from the RESL.eu interviewees, 15 young people were selected to be included in my doctoral study. Although this chapter only presents the interviews conducted with young people, it is important to note that the qualitative data collection for RESL.eu also included 12 focus groups with young people, as well as interviews and focus groups with teachers and education support staff, school and college management, apprenticeship providers, trainers, youth workers and parents. Since this body of data was not included in my doctoral study, the associated fieldwork is not described in this chapter. From here on, the term 'participants' will be used to refer only to the young people interviewed for the project (and not other categories of RESL.eu research participants).

Participant selection for the RESL.eu project

Potential participants for the RESL.eu project were identified through an a priori purposive sampling strategy (Hood, 2007). Since the main focus of RESL.eu was being ESL - defined as educational underachievement[27], three groups of young people were outlined who, according to the theoretical framework of the project (Clycq et al., 2017), were identified as being at a theoretical risk of ESL:

1. young people still in education (A levels or FE college) but at risk of ESL/ educational underachievement (identified from Survey A1, see below);
2. young people enrolled on alternative programmes designed to address the issue of ESL focusing on prevention, intervention or compensation, such as apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships, bridging courses, and so on ;
3. NEETs who had already left education with low or no qualifications (Clycq et al., 2014).

Qualitative fieldwork took place between November 2014 and October 2016, in several subsequent and sometimes overlapping stages. In each stage, young people from one of the

[27] The concept of ESL was discussed on page 18 in the Introduction, with several interconnected definitions provided: as it is commonly defined in the EU policy, the working definition for the RESL.eu project and as it translated into the UK context.

three a priori groups were interviewed[28]. Then, towards the end of the fieldwork period, repeat interviews were completed with a selection of participants, as illustrated by Table 1:

Table 1. Stages of data collection for the RESL.eu project, interviews with young people

Key stages of data collection	March - July 2014	Nov-Dec 2014	Apr 2015	June 2015	Nov-Dec 2015	March - May 2016	June-Aug 2016	Sept-Oct 2016
Survey A1								
1st interviews with								
(1) A level students								
(1) FE college students								
(2) Apprentices, etc.								
(3) NEETs								
Repeat interviews								
(1) A level students								
(1) FE college students								
(2) Apprentices, etc.								
(3) NEETs								

Survey A1 provided the baseline for selecting interview participants. From the Year 12 cohort, potential interviewees were identified based on their socio-economic background, school engagement and social support indicators – concepts identified as relevant risk factors for ESL in the RESL.eu theoretical framework (Clycq et al., 2017). All survey participants were scored on their school engagement and social support measures according to their responses in Survey A1, as having Low, Medium or High levels on these scales. Potential interviewees were drawn from four subgroups: Low School Engagement – Low Social Support; Low School Engagement – High Social Support; High School Engagement – Low Social Support; High School Engagement – High Social Support. In addition, socio-economic variables connected with ESL - such as migration status; potential working class background based on parent occupation and education level; and so on - were also taken into account. According to the

[28] Alongside other participants, such as teachers, school personnel, training and apprenticeship providers, youth workers and parents.

project guidelines, we aimed for a varied selection of young people in terms of ethnicity and migration background, as well as equal gender representation. After developing these profiles, we identified 16 participants, in accordance with the project guidelines (Clycq et al., 2014). Fourteen young people were interviewed in November 2014, and another two in April 2015, across three secondary schools and a FE college from London. Half of these 16 students were interviewed again in 2016.

At the same time of conducting the last student interviews, we also started identifying those young people from Survey A1 Year 12 cohort who had left the education system. To help with this process, we asked participating educational institutions to send us a list of their students from the relevant age cohort who had left the school/ college subsequently, after Survey A1. In this stage, 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people who indeed had left education before achieving their intended qualifications, and were not in education or training at the time. Two of them agreed to a repeat interview a year later.

Between October 2015 and April 2016, we focused on the so-called extra-muros measures: alternative or 'compensatory' pathways outside of regular secondary schools, which were designed to address the issue of ESL focusing on prevention, intervention or compensation (Clycq et al., 2014). Research shows that in England, the vocational provision, apprenticeships among them, is not valued as highly as the academic route (Brockmann, 2013; Fuller and Unwin, 2009; Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck, 2012; Iles et al., 2008; Roberts and Atherton, 2011; Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018; Simmons, Russell and Thompson, 2013). Instead, vocational programmes are commonly interpreted as '*provider of last resort for those whom other forms of learning have failed'* (Keep, 2015:473). Therefore, in addition to intentionally compensatory programmes – such as bridging courses and pre-apprenticeships which cater for young people with very low or no qualifications - in the UK, apprenticeships were also categorised as extra-muros measures.

Participants in this category were identified through the specific programmes they took part it. So, contact was made with staff members leading the alternative learning programmes, then young people were invited to take part in an interview with us when our research team visited their programme. Thus, these participants were largely self-selecting. Altogether, 13 young people were interviewed at this stage, of which 7 were reinterviewed in the following year.

As described earlier, in June 2015 we interviewed eight young people identified from Survey A1 who subsequently left education during or after year 12. However, we were also interested in the trajectories of young people who dropped out of education at an earlier age, who could not have been captured through our school survey. Therefore, between March and May 2016, we conducted interviews with a further 23 young people NEET, 9 of whom were re-interviewed in September-October of the same year. These interviews were organised with the help of local authorities and youth organisation working with NEET young people.

The final stage of fieldwork included 26 repeat interviews, completed between March and October 2016, with young people from all three groups, as described above. These provided an opportunity to find out what had happened in these young people's lives in the intervening period.

It needs to be mentioned that the length of time between the two interviews with the same person was rather variable. While about one to one and half years passed between the two interviews conducted with young people from the first category (still in education); in the case of the second NEET subgroup, the difference was only 5 to 6 months (see Table 1). On the other hand, the two NEETs identified through the survey were re-interviewed over a year after the first interview. The time gap between the two interviews with those enrolled on alternative programmes varied between 6 to 8 months.

Although in an ideal situation all participants should have had a comparable amount of time between the two interviews, the stages of data collection and their timeframe was determined by the RESL.eu project. While questions could be asked about the comparability of the longitudinal data, this was not a comparative study between different groups of young people. Hence, the difference in timeframe is of less importance in this case. The subgroups were delineated not with the aim of comparing and contrasting them, but as a means to ensure variability and diversity among participants, to ensure that young people with different education trajectories are included in the study.

Recruiting participants for the RESL.eu project

Survey A1 asked for participants' contact details, including their home address, phone number, email address and social media availability, although participants were allowed to provide as much or as little information as they wanted to. Potential participants selected for interviews were then approached through email and/ or telephone. As a first attempt, an invitation email was sent, which briefly presented the RESL.eu project, its aims, methods and key ethical

considerations. If no reply was received, these emails were followed up by further emails and phone calls. For this, my office phone and the project mobile were used, not my personal numbers. Participants were informed about my doctoral study and the possibility of their interviews being included in it when I met them for the interviews. I also reiterated my intention at the repeat interviews.

As mentioned earlier, the side-entry participants, those enrolled on alternative learning courses[29] and NEET programmes, were recruited through their respective programmes, which, in turn, were invited to take part in the RESL.eu project using targeted networking. For example, two apprenticeship programmes were recruited at an apprenticeship event that the lead researcher for RESL.eu and myself attended, specifically with the aim of networking and recruiting further participants. While identifying potential apprenticeship programmes and getting in contact with staff members needed concerted effort, recruiting them for the project went smoothly: people seemed interested in the research and were happy to participate. The third apprenticeship was recruited with the help of an ex-colleague from the university. He was a lecturer at a FE college at the time, and he helped with organising the survey in this college the year before. When we needed to recruit apprenticeships, we again requested his assistance.

Most of the NEET participants were approached with the help of two local authorities, specifically programmes provided by these to local NEETs. Some members of the RESL.eu research team had already worked in partnership with these local authorities on other research projects. The contacts gained through those projects connected our team with council officers working with young people NEET. After establishing contact with them, we negotiated access to participants, convenient dates to visit them and conduct interviews with a few young people. During our visit to the councils' premises, we introduced ourselves and invited the young people to take part in an interview.

The majority of participants were invited to the repeat interview individually, without the help of the organisations – schools, colleges, alternating learning and NEET programmes – that made the first interviews possible, with the exception of a few NEET participants, who –

[29] Different alternative programmes were included in the RESL.eu project, such as apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships and bridging courses, as mentioned earlier. Only the recruitment of apprenticeships will be described here, because participants from the other programmes were not included in my doctoral study.

although had finished their programmes - were still using the council's services occasionally. The other participants were contacted through email and phone.

Participant selection for my doctoral study

The second phase of sampling consisted of selecting which RESL.eu participants to be included in my doctoral study. They were identified in '*a strategic way'* (Bryman, 2016:408), through purposive sampling. At this second phase, three additional criteria were employed, on top of the initial sampling criterion inherited from RESL.eu of being at risk of educational underachievement. At this time, I was already familiar with the data, therefore I was able to only include relevant cases.

First, I was interested in the longitudinal dimension of aspirations and strategies for implementation, therefore only those RESL.eu participants were considered who were interviewed twice. From the 60 young people interviewed on RESL.eu, 26 participants took part in repeat interviews. From these, 15 participants were selected for my doctoral study.

Second, I intended to '*ensure as wide a variation as possible'* (Bryman, 2016:409) in terms of demographic characteristics, in line with the principles of maximum variation sampling. Instead of focusing on one subgroup of participants based on gender, ethnicity, migration, educational background or any other demographic factor, my aim was to collect data from a varied selection of young people. My objective was to explore similarities and differences among participants' narratives with the aim of investigating the commonalities in their transition experiences and trajectories after compulsory education; and not to explore in depth the perspective of one specific demographic subgroup.

Finally, I only included interviews conducted by me, and not other members of the RESL.eu team. The RESL.eu project guidelines and the semi-structured nature of interviews provided flexibility in the topics and questions addressed during the interviews (as briefly mentioned in the Introduction). This way, I ensured that the data included addressed the specific questions at the focus of my doctoral study, not only those prescribed by the RESL.eu project. I also felt that meeting and talking to participants face-to-face provided an extra layer of understanding through observations of para- and extra-linguistic elements, physical appearance, dress style, posture, gestures and facial expressions, and so on. These all add to the overall image and impression constructed by the researcher – myself - about the participants. It is well accepted in the methodological literature that '*each interview is individually crafted'* (Seidman, 2013:97)

by the researcher and the participant, and the relationship between them. The person of the interviewer has impact on the content of the interview due to the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, personal interest, interviewing skills, sensitivity and the rapport with the interviewee, among others. Besides, a face-to-face interview offers different intersubjective understanding to a recording or transcript only. For all these reasons I decided to only include in this doctoral study face-to-face interviews conducted by me.

Based on these sampling criteria, 15 young people were selected for my doctoral study out of the 26 RESL.eu interviewees who took part in the longitudinal research. Table 2 provides an overview of the stages of data collection and the participants selected for my doctoral study.

Table 2. Stages of data collection and participants selection for my doctoral study

Stages of data collection	Timeframe	Participants
First interviews	**Nov 2014 - May 2016**	**All**
- A level students	November 2014	Aisha, Darius, Flora, Mina
- Students in FE college	April 2015	Ezra, Greg
- NEETs (from Survey A1)	June 2015	Evie, Kurt
- Apprentices	Nov-Dec 2015	Hope, Maria, Reuben
- NEETs (from NEET programmes)	May 2016	Adam, Hugh, James, Rosie
Repeat interviews	**March - Oct 2016**	**All**

In two cases (the first interview with Evie and the second interview with Hope), two members of the RESL.eu team conducted the interviews, including myself. Acknowledging that the presence of two interviewers might have impacted on the data, interview process, relationship between participants and even the content of interviews; these interviews were included in my doctoral study because they still met the criteria explained above. Since I was present during the interviews, I was able to ask all the questions I was interested in; and I also had the opportunity to meet the participants face-to-face. Arguably, the presence of another interviewer only added to the richness of the data.

Research participants

Following the rationale of diversity, the final sample of 15 young people was comprised of 7 female and 8 male participants, a fairly gender-balanced sample. Participants were aged between 16 and 21 at the time of the first interview, at a stage when they were making the first move into higher or further education, employment, or something else. Regarding ethnicity, 6

participants self-identified as White British. It is well documented that in the UK, White British children and young people from a working class background, especially boys, are one of the lowest achieving groups is education (Evans, 2006; House of Commons Education Committee, 2014; Reay, 2009; Stahl, 2015; Strand, 2014). Therefore, during participant selection for the RESL.eu project, special attention was paid so that this group is represented in the sample. Among the rest of participants, one identified as White Irish, two as White Other – both arrived to the UK a few years earlier, one from Hungary, the other from Romania; one Arab; two Asian British from Sri-Lankan background; one Black British Caribbean, one Black African and one participant was of Mixed ethnic background. Several participants had a history of migration, with 4 being born abroad, and one participant, Greg, spending most of his childhood in Spain. Table 3 provides a summary of the main demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Country of birth	Status, 1st interview	Status, 2nd interview
Adam	Male	White British	UK	NEET	NEET
Aisha	Female	Black African	Nigeria	A levels	University
Darius	Male	Asian British: Other	UK	A levels	Employed
Evie	Female	White British	UK	NEET	Employed
Ezra	Male	White British	UK	FE college	NEET
Flora	Female	White Other	Hungary	A levels	University
Greg	Male	White British	UK	FE college	FE college
Hope	Female	Black British: Caribbean	UK	Apprentice	Apprentice
Hugh	Male	White Irish	UK	NEET	NEET
James	Male	White British	UK	NEET	NEET
Kurt	Male	White British	UK	NEET	NEET
Maria	Female	White Other	Romania	Apprentice	Apprentice
Mina	Female	Arab	Netherlands	A levels	A levels
Reuben	Male	Mixed: White & Black Caribbean	UK	Apprentice	Apprentice
Rosie	Female	Asian British: Other	UK	NEET	NEET

All 15 participants faced a number of socio-economic risks or barriers to education and employment. Poverty was a recurring theme for many of them. Eight participants lived in a single parent household (Darius, Greg, Hope, Hugh, James, Kurt, Maria, Reuben), and two of them had a seriously ill or disabled mother (Greg and Kurt). Greg's mother had severe mental health issues and he was her main carer. Aisha lost her mother when she was a child, while Adam grew up in the care system, having no connection with his biological parents. He also had a criminal conviction. Several participants reported having at least one unemployed parent. Four participants, Aisha, Flora, Maria and Mina arrived to the UK as children, and joined the

English education system relatively late, Maria without any English language skills. Evie and Ezra reported having learning difficulties, but also a third of participants was dealing with severe physical or mental health issues. As shown, these young people were dealing with a number of risk factors - both socio-economic and individual, which, according to the literature (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Furlong, 2006; Schoon et al., 2004; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007), can have negative impact on their educational and employment outcomes.

Negotiating the interviews

In general, participants did not receive financial compensation for taking part in the interviews, with the exception of two NEETs. Adam and Hugh were offered £10 both times for their participation, in accordance with our agreement with the local authority which helped us in recruitment. This amount was meant to cover any potential travel expenses incurred.

All interviews were conducted in public places, such as schools, colleges, youth centres, cafés and restaurants. They lasted between 30 mins and 1 hour 20 mins, with the majority being 45 minutes to one hour long. The repeat interview with Reuben was cut short and lasted only 21 minutes because he unexpectedly needed to leave.

Some interviews were conducted at the premises of the respective programmes that participants attended. For example, Maria was interviewed first time at the FE college where the theoretical component of her apprenticeship programme was taught. I met Hope at the two companies where she worked as an apprentice (she changed her programme between the two interviews), and Reuben at a London hospital. The interviews with Adam, Hugh, James and Rosie were conducted at youth centres run by a local authority.

The other participants were offered a number of options regarding the location of the interview, to ensure that taking part in the research will not add any additional pressure on them, and also to minimise their time commitment. These options ranged from the schools and colleges attended to university offices and cafés, whichever was deemed most convenient by the participant. Practicalities of data collection were also taken into account when choosing location. The young people completing their A levels at the time of the first interview (Aisha, Darius, Flora, Mina) opted to be interviewed at their schools, during their free periods. Our contacts from the schools helped us setting up the interviews and booked suitable rooms for this purpose. Mina however, had moved to a different school between the survey and the first

interview and her new school was not involved in the RESL.eu project. Therefore, I interviewed her in the large open plan atrium of her new school during school hours so the hall was mostly empty, so we were able to talk privately. Another two interviews (Ezra and Greg) were conducted at a secluded part of the FE college library where our discussion could not be overheard by others.

Since Evie and Kurt were NEET, they had no connection with any of our partner institutions which could have helped us booking a room. With them, the interview was conducted in a café, over lunch. Half of the repeat interviews were also conducted in cafés and restaurants. When scheduling the interviews, we arranged an easy to find location to meet (for example, tube stations), then walked to a nearby café or restaurant – preferably a quiet one, where we had the opportunity to sit down and talk. Before meeting participants for the interviews, I researched the locations online to make sure that there were a number of suitable places there to conduct the interview. For example, I interviewed Mina at a MacDonald's close to her school; I met up with Evie in front of an infant school where she had started working, then went to a nearby café with her. Maria, in addition to working full time, was also babysitting her nephew over the weekends. Therefore I met her on a Saturday in a MacDonald's, together with her 5 year old nephew. Adam, Ezra, Hugh and Kurt met with me close to their homes. Each time, participants were provided refreshments.

Some participants were still enrolled on various programmes at the time of the repeat interviews. I met Greg in the college library again, where a quiet spot was booked for us by staff contacts. Hope and Reuben were visited at their apprenticeship training places: Reuben at the same hospital as before, Hope at her new apprenticeship (as she left the previous programme). As mentioned earlier, the council helped scheduling the repeat interviews with James and Rosie at their premises.

Finally, Darius and Flora decided to visit Middlesex University for the repeat interview, for which a separate office was booked.

One interview – the first conversation with Flora - was conducted in Hungarian, our mother tongue. She was identified as a potential interviewee through the survey, so I knew she was Hungarian. I approached her with an email written in this language, and our pre- and post-interview communication was conducted in Hungarian too. I felt that using our first language, thus emphasizing that we both belonging to the same ethnic/ cultural group, might help reduce

the social distance between us, and provide a common ground for establishing rapport. Perhaps related to this, Flora was one of the first participants to accept the invitation to take part in the interviews, in fact, she replied to the initial invitation email, without me having to follow that up by phone calls, which was fairly unusual. Again, she was the first to reply to the repeat interview invitation too. Flora has also connected with me on the professional online networking site LinkedIn.

Flora was offered to choose which language to use during the interview but she left this choice to me. The majority of the first interview was then conducted in Hungarian – with the intent of improving rapport, as explained above. However, I also asked some questions in English, in order to probe her English language skills. She seemed equally competent in both, with the exception of some technical terms, such as 'apprenticeship' in Hungarian. She clearly encountered this term in an English context and seemed to struggle finding the right Hungarian term. The second interview with her was conducted in English purely for administrative and convenience reasons, since at that time I did not have access to a Hungarian speaking transcriber. However, after establishing rapport in Hungarian, it was felt that consecutive language use did not impact on the conversation and rapport between us.

Timeframe of the study

As explained earlier, about half of the participants (Aisha, Darius, Evie, Ezra, Flora, Greg, Kurt and Mina) took part in Survey A1. As a result, their survey responses were also included in the data analysis. The survey captured detailed information on a range of topics from demographic variables[30] to school engagement, social support indicators and aspirations[31], providing opportunity to follow them over a more extended period, covering three academic years: 2013/14, 2014/15, 2016/16 - between spring 2014 and summer of 2016.

It also needs to be mentioned that I kept in loose contact with a few participants through social media, after accepting their friendship/ connection requests. Although not seeking out these connection myself, I felt the need to accept social media requests from participants as a way of honouring their participation in the research project. As a result, access to their social media profiles allowed me to learn about changes in their lives after the second round of interviews

[30] The side-entry participants completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendices) to capture background data about them.
[31] For more details see the introductory section about the RESL.eu project.

and the RESL.eu project. Some of this information has been used in this study, most importantly when drawing participants' portraits in Chapter 5.

Finally, I also found out about developments in participants' educational and employment situation when contacting them as part of the RESL.eu project, for example inviting them to various events organised by the project. At one such event Hope was an invited speaker. While other young people were not able to participate in these events, I talked to several of them through phone and had brief, informal conversations about changes in their lives in respect to studies, work and aspirations. The data gathered though these phone calls were incorporated into the participant portraits (Chapter 5) and they informed, to some extent, the findings of this study.

I included this additional longitudinal data into my analysis for two reasons: first, they provided insight into young people's experiences in post-compulsory education and the labour market over a longer period; second, because this information has shaped my interpretation of their choices and pathways. Adding these data to the analysis only makes transparent the full amount of information that informed the conclusions drawn.

This being a small scale qualitative study, I cannot make any claims for the representativeness of participants to all young people who are at risk of educational underachievement in London, let alone England or the UK. However, it is hoped that this research will provide new insights into the issue of youth transitions, in regards to how young people make sense of risks and opportunities in a global city like London, their decision making processes, and the impact of social networks, structural factors and dominant discourses on their trajectories after leaving compulsory education.

Data collection method: repeat interviews with young people

My doctoral study focused on the aspirations and trajectories of 15 young people, gathered through in-depth repeat interviews. Given the complexity of the subject, it was deemed that semi-structured in-depth interviews with young people would provide the best material for analysis since the interview is an opportunity for a detailed conversation, thus provides rich, profound data on complex issues.

Qualitative interviewing is possibly the most commonly used method in qualitative enquiries, as it is an effective tool to explore everyday experiences and the meanings people construct about them (Bryman, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Flick, 2009); various social phenomena

in their rich complexity, and issues related to identity and representation (Elliott, 2005; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). It provides an opportunity to obtain detailed descriptions of people's personal experiences, views and feelings that might be difficult to unearth with other methods.

The longitudinal qualitative research design is well suited to researching complex processes and understanding continuity and change in people's lives (Thomson, 2007; Vincent, 2013; Ryan, Rodriguez and Trevena, 2016). Conducting repeat interviews with participants provided rich, contextualised data about the complex structures and mechanisms that impacted on participants' experiences and aspirations during their educational trajectories and transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives. This allowed me to probe the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors in changes of aspirations and plans and '*to make connections between the micro and the macro'* (Vincent, 2013: 352). Juxtaposing young people's accounts from the two interviews – aspirations and prospective plans delineated during the first interviews and the retrospective stories of the intervening period related during the repeat interviews – enabled me to explore any '*apparent discordance between what people* say *and what they* do*'* (Thomson, 2007:572), and through this, have a more holistic and situated understanding of young people's educational and occupational decision making, strategies of implementation, the intended and unintended consequences of their actions, as well as the structural conditions and policies impacting on them.

While single interviews are already well equipped to gather rich data, they can only provide a '*useful snapshot of lived experience specific to particular time and space'* (Vincent, 2013:351). Repeat interviews, even if completed over a relatively short time, can provide added benefits not available in single-interview research designs. Some of these benefits are related to what Elliott (2005) calls having the opportunity for 'the second bite of the apple': such as the ability to seek clarifications and additional information if needed (Vincent, 2013). For example, meeting Greg the second time provided the opportunity to ask more questions about his past. Moving between two countries as a child, the timeline of his story was not entirely clear after the first interview, but I only realised that when listening to the recording. During a repeat interview it is possible to verify information and gain deeper understanding even about the same piece of information.

In addition, completing two (or more) interviews with the same person allows for a qualitatively different relationship to develop between researcher and the researched. Meeting

the same person for the second time gives the illusion of an actual relationship, especially that interviews are conducted in relative privacy, with the researcher paying close attention to everything the interviewee has to say. Therefore during a repeat interview participants might feel safer to impart more personal, sometimes sensitive information. Adam, for example, told me about his criminal conviction only at the second interview, but even then, without providing any details about it, not even the reason for which he was convicted. Looking back to the first interview from this perspective, I realised that a number of issues he mentioned made sense only in the context of this new piece of information. Listening back to the recording, it became clear that he was close to sharing this information several times, but in the end the interview finished without him confessing to being an ex-convict. The second time we met, he opened the conversation with this piece of information. Repeat interviews are better suited to carry out research with vulnerable people and/ or about sensitive topics (Vincent, 2013), as meeting multiple times allows time and opportunity for trust to develop.

The longitudinal design is naturally a better match for my topic of interest, aspirations and trajectories after compulsory education. Focusing on change and transition from compulsory school to the next step, this topic requires a longer term perspective. Although it is possible to investigate past trajectories and changes in aspirations and future plans with single interview design, this method still only provides insight into interpretations of the past at one specific time in the participant's life. As opposed to this, conducting repeat interviews offers the chance to 'develop understandings about multiple identities and shifting realities' (Vincent, 2013), to compare and contrast participants' accounts from multiple points in time. Consequently, it can provide a more adequate research tool to explore young people's decision making processes, implementation strategies, and the consequences of risk and opportunities on future outcomes.

On the other hand, repeat interviews bring their own challenges (Ryan, Rodriguez and Trevena, 2016). For instance, there is an on-going debate about how to analyse and present data from repeat interviews: whether the two interviews should be analysed separately, as different research encounters, or combined together (Thomson, 2007). In this study, I analysed the two interviews as separate but related research encounters, contrasting and comparing pieces of information as well as narrative structures, in order to capture both changes and continuities in participants' lives (Ryan, Rodriguez and Trevena, 2016).

Ryan, Rodriguez and Trevena (2016) highlight a number of problematic issues with repeat interviews, including ethical considerations about the heightened possibility to jeopardise

anonymity and the use and presentation of the data. In my case, participants were informed about the longitudinal repeat interview design in advance. It was felt that this provided participants with more agency, they had the opportunity to think through and decide whether they wanted to be involved. Also, the length of the time between the two interviews was not particularly long, the longest time being 1.5 years. All participants were able to recall the first encounter and had no objection discussing previous topics in more detail.

While being aware of potential issues with repeat interviews, in this specific study I felt that the advantages greatly outweighed the disadvantages. Vincent (2013) argues that repeat interviews are particularly suitable '*to make connections between the micro and the macro that were not obvious from a single interview'* (Vincent, 2013:352). To understand both the individual and structural conditions, the relationship between the micro and the macro (and meso too) was a key objective of my study too. Repeat interviews provide 'a more holistic and situated understanding' of research participants' lives due to the opportunity to probe, clarify and follow up unclear pieces of information; the closer relationship and trust that might develop between researcher and participant; and through allowing insight into the changes in their lives, identities and opinions; as well as the outcomes of past decisions, action, opportunities and constraints.

Although it was planned that the interviews will last a maximum of one hour, a few of them lasted longer than the planned length of time. However, as some participants were willing and even enthusiastic to stay this long, it was felt that it would have been insensitive not to listen to all that they wanted to express and impart on the subject. Besides, stopping them might have harmed the rapport developed between us and could have jeopardise the repeat interviews.

As explained in the introductory section about the RESL.eu project, the topic guides used during the interviews were coordinated among the RESL.eu team members from nine countries, and standardised version used for data collection. However, each interviewer had the freedom to adapt the questions according to the specific circumstances of the respective country and/ or research participants, as well as the interviewers own research interests. While on the RESL.eu project interviews were conducted by all four UK team members, in my doctoral study I only included interviews conducted by me.[32]

[32] At two interviews another RESL.eu team member was present, as explained earlier.

There were considerable differences among the interviews regarding researcher input: some participants talked uninterruptedly for long periods of time; other interviews had more conversational styles. While I had a clear list of issues and questions to be addressed, their order was flexible, participants were allowed to speak freely and even depart from the subject if they wanted to, as suggested by Bryman (2016).

Data analysis

Data management and preparation for analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the integrity of data; in addition, field-notes were taken too. The recordings were transcribed verbatim after the interviews using the services of experienced transcribers – as part of the RESL.eu project. After that, however, I listened to all interviews and checked the transcriptions and corrected them if necessary to ensure accuracy of text.

The interview conducted in Hungarian was transcribed by a Hungarian speaking professional transcriber. After checking for accuracy, I translated the transcription into English and worked with the English material from then on. Since the conversation during the first interview revolved around educational experiences, the participant's aspirations, and her relationship with family members, school staff and friends – all common everyday topics – I found translating from Hungarian into English straightforward. Flora seemed to prefer short, simple , factual sentences in both languages, which might have contributed the relative ease of transcription.

In accordance with the terms and conditions of the RESL.eu project, all audio recordings will be destroyed after the RESL.eu project has finished, while the transcriptions will be deposited in the RESL.eu database. Until 31 January 2021, RESL.eu research team members from all nine participating countries will have access to this database and the all interviews. After this date, all transcriptions will be made public – conform with EU regulations about data obtained through EU-funded projects. Nonetheless, anonymity and confidentiality will still be maintained through using pseudonyms and removing any identifiers which may lead to the personal identification of any of the research participants.

Confidential information – such as signed informed consent forms and demographic questionnaires - is stored securely, conforming with Middlesex University's data security

requirements, for example on the research team members' password protected computers and memory sticks.

Choosing pseudonyms

It is generally considered a tenet of social research to ensure the anonymity of research participants, making sure that no-one can be identified personally from publications. The main vehicle of realising this is using pseudonyms instead of participants' own names. Although this practice is ubiquitous, especially in qualitative research, there has been surprisingly little written about the process of choosing pseudonyms (Lahman et al., 2015). One reason might be that choosing pseudonyms is considered the standard procedure of anonymising research participants. Anonymity and confidentiality on the other hand are usually discussed as part of ethical research and the ethics of confidentiality.

Following naming conventions and practice, I chose pseudonyms which have the same initial as participants' real names. In addition, I tried to find a pseudonym from the same cultural or religious heritage: for example, if the real name came from the Christian tradition, I chose a Christian pseudonym too; biblical names were replaced by similar sounding biblical names. In the case of participants from a cultural or religious background I was less familiar with, I researched their names and a culturally appropriate name online. Although Ezra declared himself non-religious, I still chose a pseudonym for him that still reflects his father's Israeli background, and at the same time fits easily into an English context. I also paid attention to whether the name sounded more 'traditional' or rather 'modern'.

My online searches had not always brought results. For example, I could not find Mina's and Darius's original names on the internet. In their case, I chose pseudonyms which are not easily identifiable culturally, just like their original names, but are used in their ethnic/ religious group. Sometimes, if several names matched all the above criteria, I paid attention to the meaning of the names, and chose the one which was the closest to the original one. However, I acknowledge the subjective nature of this choice.

In one case, I did not follow the above procedure. Rosie, whose parents were from Sri-Lanka, introduced herself by her nickname, and preferred to be called on that instead of her Tamil given name. The pseudonym 'Rosie' suggested by my supervisor was felt to have very similar connotations to her nickname, but does not have the same initials.

While choosing adequate pseudonyms was extremely important to me, I did not negotiate their choice with research participants. This was a conscious choice: although it is considered good practice by some to use pseudonyms chosen by research participants themselves, I thought that it is more important to have pseudonyms that - hopefully – can represent participants' original names, and through that, their cultural backgrounds more adequately. If asked, participants might have chosen pseudonyms following other criteria.

Nonetheless, when meeting for the repeat interview, I did inform participants - 11 out of 15 - about the pseudonyms chosen for them, and asked their opinion about. All participants seemed pleased with the names chosen for them. However, I had not yet decided upon pseudonyms for Adam, Hugh, James and Rosie when I met them second time, therefore their pseudonyms were not approved upon by them.

Connected to the issue of truthful representation, it needs to be mentioned that the quotes from participants were not corrected or modified. While I did choose relevant sections from the interviews, thus deleting less applicable parts (which in the text is indicated with […]), the quotes represent how these young people spoke.

Data analysis method

Analysing qualitative data is a time-consuming, cyclical, iterative process, as it is widely acknowledged in the methodological literature (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2009). My PhD study consisted of a complex, multi-layered analytic journey that incorporated the experience and insights gained from a much larger project (presented earlier in this chapter), as well as the more focused analysis of the corpus of data selected for my own doctoral investigation. The 15 repeat interviews were analysed using two methodological approaches: thematic and narrative analysis. However, the analytic process has started much earlier, during data collection.

Although it is possible to start this process after all data has been collected, in qualitative research it is usually advisable to begin analysis while still doing fieldwork, while still close to the data (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2009). Throughout the entire research project – including RESL.eu and my doctoral study – I kept recording field observations, emerging questions, my reflections and initial thoughts, as part of the analytic process. These notes then have guided subsequent investigations: they provided an opportunity to probe and explore early ideas, questions and guesses during later interviews, but also at the more formal stages of data analysis. Some of these early ideas were then pursued at the more formal stages of analysis.

The following quotes from my field notes can illustrate the initial reflections and questions that steered my investigation towards specific analytic avenues:

'Choice is often based on "liking" or not something, a job, a subject, etc; or perhaps the idea of that job. To like that job/ subject is often deemed more important than the "logical" criteria: e.g. what are their strengths, whether it is hard to get into that industry, etc.'

'The present policy discourse promotes strategic style [in education and career planning]. Is that too narrow, will that reduce young people's choices later on? Is strategic planning the best approach in a labour market so much defined by chance and unpredictability?

These ideas were then explored to a greater depth, as presented in Chapters 6-8. Meeting and talking with young people also allowed me deeper insights into their perspectives that perhaps would have evaded me at a later stage, while reading the transcripts. I found these raw reflections very inspiring when later – already more detached from the data due the time passed, engagement with theory, the coding and writing up process – I revisited them. The sense of injustice condensed in them has shaped my understanding, but also provided encouragement and drive to give voice to my participants through this thesis.

'*Aspiration might not be the right concept to approach young people's future planning.*

We have this idea of one's job being a part of identity, something deeply important for them, an avenue for personal growth, satisfaction and self-fulfilment. However this might be an elitist, middle-class approach. For many, a job is a tool to earn money and be integrated into society, but not necessarily a path to self-realisation. The extent to which one's identity is invested in the job/ career they are doing can vary to a great extent.

While some young people can afford to be discerning about the jobs they take on, with a view to their CVs and future job-search, for many this is not an option. To the question of "what kind of job would you like to do", many young people simply reply "anything", "I don't mind, I would do anything".

It is a huge misunderstanding – and a very condescending mistake - to interpret this as a lack of aspirations! The position these young people are coming from is not one of the informed consumer choosing the best option available, but that of a beggar standing on the street corner,

hoping for whatever is left after the more fortunate made their choices. Their lack of aspiration is not due to a lack of intrinsic drive, but a lack of options, resources, opportunities.'

As it was explained in previous sections, the data used in my doctoral study was collected as part of RESL.eu, a project with over 180 interview and focus group participants, of which over 120 were young people. Collecting, managing and analysing this very large corpus of data was part of my job on the project. The selection of the specific body of data for my doctoral study was carried out at a late stage of my PhD, after fieldwork for RESL.eu had been completed. Therefore during the two years of RESL.eu data collection, I treated all interviews with young people as potentially part of my doctoral study, for instance I recorded PhD-related observations, reflections and questions for all, probing and exploring these in subsequent interviews. Some of these notes have shaped my analysis to a great extent, as explained above. Other hunches and ideas however were not supported by data collected afterward, so these were not pursued later on. Consequently, although my doctoral study is based only on 15 repeat interviews, the findings also build on and distil my insights gained through RESL.eu.

Before starting the more formal staged of data analysis, I read the interviews repeatedly to gain a better sense of their content and style, and the contribution they could bring to answering my research questions. Then, two analytical approaches were used to analyse the data. First, thematic analysis was employed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Coding was conducted in several subsequent stages, following the stages of data collection, but also in order to separate the two projects, RESL.eu and my doctoral study. RESL.eu operated with top-down coding, with a coding three comprised of 133 nodes developed for analysing the interviews with young people (87 interview transcripts altogether, including 60 first interviews and 27 repeat interviews). After finishing this process and completing the RESL.eu reports – all part of my job – I suspended work on my PhD and engaging with the data for a few months in order to gain some distance from the RESL.eu framework of analysis. Then, I re-coded the 15 repeat-interviews, allowing new themes to emerge from the data. The interviews were coded in detail according to the emerging themes and trends, but also paying attention to the research aims and questions (Flick, 2009). Some nodes were created 'in vivo', using the actual words and phrases from the transcript as labels for them, for example: '*something you love', 'it's down to me', 'believe in yourself', 'staying positive'*. Others were more theoretically informed, or reflected my initial questions and reflections, such as '*ideal aspirations', 'realistic aspirations', 'intelligent customer*'. Thus, as described, during the analysis stage of my

doctoral research I engaged in a primarily inductive approach to analysis. Nonetheless, the deductive character of the previous stage of analysis, that completed under the RESL.eu project, had impacted on my understanding of the data, and resulted in some themes being incorporate into my doctoral analysis,

This exploratory coding process resulted in a large number of nodes, that were then progressively revised and refined, in order to eliminate redundant ones and organise them into a more analytical tree structure by delineating connection across the nodes, structuring related nodes into 'families' and defining higher order codes (Flick, 2009). I repeated this process multiple times, to synthesize the initial descriptive nodes into more abstract, conceptual themes that can provide a coherent and robust analytical framework for my study. Table 4 below presents the codebook downloaded from NVivo, one of the iterations of the coding frame:

Table 4. NVIVO coding frame

Name
1. Aspiration as a goal
Educational aspirations
Apprenticeship
Further education
No further plans
University
Unsure
Occupational aspirations
Back-up plan
Ideal aspirations
Realistic aspirations
Undecided, 'a good job', any
Other aspirations
Family
Lifestyle
Religion
Sociability
Travel
The aspirations of relevant others
Friends' aspirations
Parental aspirations
2. Motivations

Name
Ability to do well, talent
Altruistic motivations
Financial motivations
Interest in a subject or job
'Something you love'
'To enjoy what I do'
When was the interest born
Other
3. Decision-making process,
Access and opportunity
Constraints, limitations
Experience
Influential life events
'Intelligent customer'
Role models
Negative examples
4. Implementation strategies
'Have the right attitude'
Ambition
'Believe in yourself'
Hard work
'Staying positive'

Name
Lack of convincing strategy
Catch 22
Strategic planning
Strategic uncertainty
5. Support
Lack of support
Support received from
Community or religious
Friends
Local authority, social and
Parents, family
Teachers, school, college, etc.
Support seeking behaviour
First port of call
Refusing support, help
Type of support received
Emotional support
Financial
Information
Practical help
Education
Job search

Name
6. Perceived challenges
Attitudinal limitations
Challenges for young people in
Financial constraints, poverty
Health, illness, disability
Lack of support
Low qualifications
Other
7. Beliefs and attitudes
Cultural and religious identity
How perceived by others
'It's down to me'
Meritocracy
Outlook on the future
Presenting aspirational identity
8. Change over time
Attitudes, beliefs
Educational aspirations
Motivations
Occupational aspirations
9. Methodology
Reflection on taking part in

Thematic analysis thus helped me making sense of the data: identify salient themes and connections, and bring the data into dialog with the theories and concepts from the academic literature of the topic. However, thematic analysis has a number of limitations too: it can fragment the data and obliterate the context of what is being said (Bryman, 2016). To overcome some of these limitations, I also conducted narrative analysis, which allowed me to better understand how participants experienced education, training, transition from compulsory education and/or being NEET, as well as the meanings they attached to these experiences. The topic of the research has offered itself to narrative analysis, as descriptions of aspiration formation and future planning are intrinsically storied in nature.

As discussed by Ryan (2015), narrative analysis can be particularly useful when exploring how people construct 'cohort-wide' experiences, defined over multiple vectors: temporally, socially

and geographically. Mason noted that narratives can be seen as '*interpretative devices through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others'* (Mason, 2004: 165). While narratives are tools of presentations of the self (Goffman, 1959), they cannot be interpreted as individual stories only. Narratives are embedded into wider socio-cultural discourses and structural locations, and are shaped by relationality and socio-economic context (Mason, 2004). As such, a narrative approach provided me useful tools to further explore my data, especially in terms of the connections participants themselves made between past, present and future events; and the impact of their socio-economic context on the opportunity structures of their lives. A more focused engagement with participants' narratives was necessary for developing the typology of aspirations described in detail in Chapter 6. As it is explained there, this typology is based not simply on young people's 'aspirations as end-goals' (such as a specific job or university course), but importantly, takes into account their strategies, future plans to achieve their ambitions, and the way how these strategies are presented in a more or less convincing narrative.

A narrative approach also focused my attention not only on the content of the interviews but also the ways how participants expressed themselves. I noticed during this stage how similarly A level students answered the first question of the interview, in terms of phrasing[33]. The cyclical argument made by Hugh and Rosie regarding their future plans (discussed on pages 153-156) became apparent through narrative analysis too. When analysing these interviews thematically, their answers were fragmented, coded under the relevant nodes (be that educational or occupational aspirations), which obscured the paradoxical character of the line of reasoning employed. Paying attention to the narratives also sensitised me to the performative nature of the interviews, pressing me to examine my role, as the interviewer, in the process of meaning-creation during the interview.

Thus, by combining thematic and narrative analytical frameworks, I was able to explore young people's aspiration formation and future planning from a multidimensional perspective, exploring, on the one hand, how participants presented their individual stories, and on the other, shared themes across the narratives.

[33] To the question about their future plans, A level students tended to reply in a grammatically similar fashion, following the pattern: 'I want to study [subject/ course] because I want to be [profession].'

Ethical considerations

In the UK, social research ethics are not governed by law, instead, professional and academic institutions have their own ethical or codes that researchers are expected to follow (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). This project was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of Middlesex University. Ethics and Risk Assessment forms, as well as fieldwork documents were submitted to the ethics committee for social research before each stage of data collection, as well as before embarking on this PhD. In addition, I also consulted the ethical standards of the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) and British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004).

There is an ongoing debate in the literature about ethical best practice, and the impact of growing research governance regulations (Mayor, 2004). Several commentators have highlighted that official guidelines and codes, while necessary, can be burdensome, and in some cases, can actually reduce detailed, sensitive ethical considerations to a tick box exercise executed at the beginning of a research project (Gallagher, 2009; Mason, 2002). However, ethical practice actually only starts when the ethics forms are signed off. As a social researcher, one needs to be continuously reflective of their own ethical practice, as fieldwork can throw up unexpected, ethically challenging circumstances (Mauthner et al., 2002).

Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality

Gaining informed consent from participants' is a generally accepted and required ethical principle (Bryman, 2016). In accordance with these ethical guidelines and commitment undertaken with the ethics committee, interviewees whose contact details were available, were sent an Information Sheet[34] and the project brochure by email, to provide information about the larger RESL.eu project and to give them opportunity for reflexion on the issues researched. In addition, a hard copy of the Information sheet and the project brochure was also provided before the interview. Since all participants were over 16 years old, parental consent was not sought. After providing information about the project and the ethical obligations of the researcher, participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form[35]. They were explained that participation in the research study is voluntary, and they can withdraw from the project at any time without having to explain their actions, and/ or they can refuse to answer any questions.

[34] See Appendix
[35] See Appendix

The interview questions focused on general topics such as the young people's educational trajectories and school experiences, support programmes they participated in, their aspirations and future plans, their relationships with school staff members, parents and other family members, and friends. I great deal of effort and care was taken to formulate the questions in positive terms, concentrating on opportunities, available support, and valuable skills and/or experience these young people have, rather than asking them about potentially upsetting issues, such as those leading them to become NEET. As mentioned earlier, ethical practice is an ongoing, context specific process, therefore I tried to address potentially sensitive issues in a reflexive, caring and sensitive manner

Young people were ensured anonymity and confidentiality, and promised that nothing of what they say during the interview will be shared with anyone else. They were allowed to impart as much or as little information as they felt comfortable with, when sensitive issues were mentioned they were not pressurized to talk about in more details. Several participants mentioned being bullied in the past, and many of them shared heart-breaking stories of childhood neglect, growing up in the care system, life-threatening illness, deep poverty and seemingly total social isolation. In these situations, I let them narrate their experiences freely, intending to provide a safe outlet where they can talk about the issues they face – but only if they wish so.

As part of the RESL.eu project, we arranged with the schools and other organisations we worked in partnership with to provide additional support for young people who took part in the research if they needed so. Young people were informed to whom they should turn with potential questions or concerns. The rationale behind was, these organisations – schools, NEET programmes, colleges, etc – have support workers employed specifically to provide support to vulnerable young people. Therefore we thought that they are the best placed to do so.

The ethics of care

Nonetheless, providing a list of links, or mentioning to young people that they can talk to an emotional support worker at school, did feel as a meaningless tick-box exercise, executed more for the purposes of complying with research governance, than providing any actual support for young people. In some particularly distressing cases I tried to provide useful information. For instance, Adam was unable to find a job or even to enrol on a college course due to his criminal conviction. He grew up in the care system and at the time we met, his entire social support system consisted of his grandmother and probation officer. He did not have any friends or

acquaintances, and lived alone, alternating between watching TV and going to the job centre to try to find a job. After the interview with him, I spent considerable amount of time looking for job opportunities for ex-convicts and sent a long email with several links to him. He never replied and I do not know whether he even received it, and if it was any useful. In such cases, doing social research did feel a vampiric activity, taking important resources – information - from participants, without providing anything in return.

On the other hand, I received positive feedback from several participants who felt that they have gained by participating. I would like to think that their continued participation was already a sign of a positive experience. In addition, several participants connected with me on social media, as mentioned briefly before. I accepted all friendship/ connection requests (however I did not seek these myself as a way of honouring their commitment to this research project and my promise to them about contacting me later on, after the interviews, if they have any questions. Having access to the social media feeds of some participants, I was able to find out about new developments in their lives. Although not cultivating closer relationship and communication with them, I usually congratulate them when they find a new job, enrol on a course or get accepted to university. Right before the second interview with Mina, I decided to reveal my personal phone number to her, due to signal problems with the official mobile. Few months later she sent me a text message informing me about starting university. Others told me directly that taking part in the research had been positive experience; for instance Greg said:

> *'I enjoy having interviews like this, I like to talk about things like this cause I don't get many options to do, you know, this is my first ever interview like this, I've never really done anything like this before but I like it, it's nice to talk to people about it.'*

Relevant ethical consideration was given for the analysis and representation of the data too as I aimed to adopt a '*rigorously reflexive approach to analysis'* (Kelly and Ali, 2004:124). Since many questions were personal, there was a possibility to present the findings in such a way that might cause emotional harm to the participants.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary of main issues related to fieldwork, data collection and analysis. The thesis was based on a qualitative study, specifically repeat interview with 15 young people. Importantly, this doctoral research was embedded into a larger EU-funded and EU-wide project, RESL.eu. The relationship between the two projects, RESL.eu and my PhD

study was explained in detail in the Introduction. In the methodology chapter, more information was provided on the participant selection criteria and the subsequent stages of data collection. In addition, this chapter explained the two approaches to data analysis - thematic and narrative analysis - that were employed. Then, issues related to research ethics were also addressed. Given the complexities of my doctoral study, that it builds on shared data collected as part of a larger project, the relatively lengthy explanation of data collection and analysis methods was necessary to make the research process transparent. Some of the issues mentioned, for example the time-gap between the two interviews will be revisited in the analytic chapters, where the specific issue is salient. Before that, the next chapters introduces the 15 young people to the reader.

CHAPTER 5. 15 PORTRAITS - INTERLUDE

Introduction

One of the aims of this longitudinal qualitative study was to gain in-depth insight into young people's aspirations: how these are understood, constructed and implemented by them. I was specifically interested in the aspirations of young people from London who were identified as being at risk of educational underachievement - for various reasons, at the time of their transition from compulsory education to the next stage in their lives: further or higher education, employment or, for some, being NEET. Research shows that young people with low or no qualifications are particularly vulnerable to experience unemployment and periods of being NEET (Rumberger, 1987; 2011; Furlong, 2006; 2013; France, 2016; Powell, 2018). Low academic attainment and a lack of relevant qualifications therefore are among the key impediments of successful transitions and young people realising their aspirations. Hence, it was hypothesized that these cases can provide relevant data on the 'intersection of identities and inequalities within young people's lives' (Archer et al. 2013:8) and shine a light on the structures and processes that support or hinder young people during their transition from education to employment; and the limitations and opportunities that they face while trying to achieve their aspirations.

Chapters 5 to 8 will present the findings of this study, through the lens of the theoretical concepts presented in Chapter 3. During the development of these chapters, it was felt that presenting the findings thematically only does not do justice to the individual voices of the 15 participants: their experiences, struggles, setbacks and achievements get obscured by the fragmenting nature of thematic analysis. Chapter 5 therefore is devoted to the individual stories of the young people who took part in this research. In addition to providing a voice to participants by allowing their personal account to be told in the midst of analysis, this chapter also aims to help the reader in better situating the findings. Thus, this chapter introduces the participants, setting the scene for further analyses in the subsequent chapters.

Adam

Adam described a life without any stability, reliable support and human connection; a bleak childhood and he expected a difficult future. He grew up in the care system, spending most of his childhood there, from the age of 3 to 18. At some point in his life, he committed an

undisclosed crime, the consequences of which seemed to be haunting him ever since. He was of white British background, and at nearly 21, one of the oldest participants.

When I first met him, he lived in a semi-independent accommodation provided for young people leaving care, then moved to another temporary place by the second interview a few months later. His childhood was marked by constant change, being moved around between foster parents, care homes, social workers, schools. *'When you're in care, you're not seen as a person, you're just seen as another object that you can move around or be told what to do, you don't seem to have any rights or you know, the ability to think for yourself'*, he told me.

This lack of stability had impacted his school engagement and academic attainment; as he explained: '*It's really hard trying to concentrate because you get into a subject and all of a sudden you move to a different school where they're not even doing the exact same subject.'* For Adam, school was a place of bullying and discouragement: he was bullied by other students '*because I was in care, because I was bigger than everyone, because I wore glasses'*; and not paid much attention to by teachers, who, he felt, did not take into consideration his circumstances. He was told by many teachers, in various schools and '*numerous times*' that '*there's no point learning this, you're only going to fail it'*. Adam was suspended and excluded from school several times during his education, completing his GCSEs in an Emotional Behaviour Difficulty (EBD) school. In all this time, he never felt valued or listened to, neither by teachers, nor foster parents or social workers.

Adam talked at length about the emotional repercussions of his difficult, grim childhood: he lacked confidence, seemed unable to trust people and build relationships, and ultimately felt unprepared to take on the challenges of adult life:

> *Being in care, you're so used to moving around, you don't get used to speaking to people, meeting people, or learning how to make friends, or anything like that. So when you come to an environment where you have to go to work, it's a totally alien environment. You've never had to be around that many people before, you've never had to follow the rules.*

Despite all, Adam's story also revealed his remarkable resilience. Realising the difficulties of studying at his EBD school, Adam sought support and as a result, special measures were put in place for him: he studied in the evenings, in one-to-one sessions with teachers. Although he only got a few low GCSE grades - E in Maths, Functional Skills level 1 in English and ICT, C

in Science - he took pride in being the only student in years at this school who achieved any GCSEs at all.

Perhaps the only positive encounter he mentioned from his childhood was his relationship with Kenneth, a carer from one of the care homes: '*he was there for the five years that I was there and he's one of those that you could have a really bad day and you could go to him and just cry your eyes out on his shoulder and it wouldn't matter*' – he explained. Kenneth encouraged him to pursue education. Apparently, he was the first person in Adam's life to do so. According to Adam, one chat with Kenneth changed his outlook and his behaviour, because he felt listened to and understood by him. In addition to emotional support and advise, Kenneth also helped with practical issues, for example talked with teachers in Adam's behalf and negotiated a special programme for him at school. Kenneth was the only person Adam kept in touch with from his childhood, through Facebook. He was also Adam's role model: '*He was in the same situation as me, he was in a care home when he was younger, and he's had lot of learning difficulties and things like that. But he's turned it all around so that proves that I can',* he explained.

After finishing school at 16, Adam enrolled on a horticulture course at a local FE college, but that course was cancelled a few months into. Not being able to study horticulture, Adam gained a level 1, then a level 2 Diploma in Professional Cookery. However, Adam never worked in this profession, apart from work experience in college. His only paid job was two months at Primark over the Christmas period in 2013/14.

After turning 18, Adam had to leave the care home in Kent and move to London, where he was placed in a semi-independent living accommodation. Here he was expected to cook for everyone in the house, which led to conflicts with housemates. He tried to enrol on a level 3 cookery course but could not find any nearby, so he started looking for a job. Adam still wanted to return to education to study horticulture as he originally planned, or construction – he explained during the first interview. By the second interview however, his plans of studying seemed shattered. Due to his criminal conviction, he was refused a place at college and he could not get any job either.

During the first interview, he mentioned getting some friends from the house where he lived. However, they were gone by the second interview: apparently, they had an argument and assaulted him, so he was moved out into a temporary accommodation. He referred many times to his own safety being in danger because of the criminal record he had.

When asked about the people in his life, he could only list three: his grandmother and aunt, whom he visited once every two weeks; and a Probation Officer he started seeing only two weeks before our interview. Having no friends or family, unable to study and work, Adam described a typical day as follows: '*Make a cup of tea, have a cigarette, watch TV till the evening, cook dinner, make another cup of tea, another couple of cigarettes, fall asleep, do exactly the same thing.*' Nonetheless, he was also looking for a job constantly, 40 hours a week, as expected by the job centre.

Adam had clear aspirations: he wanted to work outdoors, in horticulture or construction, and eventually own his own business. He looked up the qualifications needed for that and the colleges offering these; he applied to college and had a seemingly feasible plan to achieve his goal. He was also looking for a job constantly, but without any success. In the narrow confines of a criminal record, non-existent social networks and low qualifications, Adam had a realistic and stern outlook on life, and seemed determined to continue searching for an opportunity to study further and work: *'It's just keep on looking, just keep looking and keep looking and just keep asking and keep trying - that's all you can do; just keep putting on a brave face.'*

Aisha

Aisha was born in 1996 in Nigeria, then moved to the UK at 15 with her father, stepmother and several of her 8 siblings. Her father used to be a high-ranking police officer in Nigeria, while her late mother was a lawyer. In the UK, her father became a businessman, with her stepmother looking after the family and home. All her older siblings have attended university and had professional jobs: one of her brothers was a doctor, another an engineer, while her older sisters were studying law and medicine.

Aisha came across as a bubbly and friendly young girl; very polite, open and optimistic. She seemed to have many friends among school mates, neighbours, and later, university colleagues. She wanted to study Law at university and become a lawyer, just like her late mother. Her large and well-educated family seemed to provide a great deal of emotional, practical and financial support to her to achieve her aspirations and feel well during that process.

Aisha studied well in Nigeria, she had very good results especially in science. She was a 'prefect' in school: *'you were supposed to show, rule by example [...] the Prefects lead the students and then we report to the teachers and the Principal'*, and helped out at the mosque.

Arriving in the British education system at 15, Aisha started at a local secondary school. Here, however, she had a limited range of subjects she could choose from, as she arrived late for some of the GCSE subjects; for instance, she could not study science and psychology, subjects she was interested in. At the GCSEs, Aisha achieved lower grades than she expected. On the other hand, she enjoyed the social side of going to school, and participated eagerly in school activities. She enjoyed her one week work experience in school as a receptionist and helping younger students with maths. She also helped older people to use computers through the school.

Although her education seemed to have suffered initially as a result of moving countries right before the GCSEs, with the support of her family, especially her father, Aisha managed to improve her grades and get accepted to a good university. For instance, she and her younger siblings had a private tutor helping them with their studies; and an Islamic lesson teacher coming to their house on the weekends too. In addition, Aisha left the secondary school and started studying in a private tuition college, where she was able to choose from a wider range of subjects and received more attention from teachers. Here, in one year, she was learning towards her A levels and also re-taking some of her GCSE exams, which she found '*tough*'. While she managed to improve her GCSEs, this time, her A levels suffered. After this, Aisha enrolled on a foundation course at her chosen university, to further improve her chances of being accepted to study Law there. She received the university acceptance letter on the day of the second interview and she was very excited about starting her university course. She had three other siblings at the same university: an older sister studying neuroscience, and two younger brothers doing foundation courses.

Based on the two interviews, Aisha's is a success story: after initial difficulties as a newly arrived migrant starting school in London in the middle of the GCSEs and receiving lower than expected grades, she managed to improve her academic attainment and get on a Law course at a good university. However, her progress was far from straightforward, and also it relied heavily on her family's financial resources. Aisha was grateful for the support she received from her family: '*I really think I have a lot of support around me right now because I have my family [...] I have other friends and family, I've had a lesson teacher'*, she explained. She was also well aware that many young people do not have such support: '*I've met a lot of people that have like difficult financial situations, because they have to like pay their rent and they have to like pay their tuition fees and there are a lot of expenses at the university.*'

Although at the first interview she planned to stay in the UK, by the second interview, Aisha decided she wanted to move back to Nigeria after finishing university and a master's degree, for *'family reasons'*. There, she would need to study further in order to practice law. Aisha also planned on having her own business in Nigeria, alongside her studies, as well as travelling more.

Darius

Darius was born in 1996 in the UK to Sri Lankan parents. When we met, he lived with his mother, a carer working with elderly people. Darius did not have any contact with his father. He seemed to have a good relationship with his mother, grandmother and her two aunts.

At the first interview, he was studying for his A levels in a North-West London secondary school, and wanted to become a doctor. As he explained, his grandmother's dementia made him aware and interested in medicine. Previously, he changed schools in year nine. Originally, he attended a prestigious secondary school, but he found it too competitive with too much pressure on him. In the new school, he was able to study at his own pace, and his grades improved.

Darius came across as a highly ambitious and strategic young man. He planned to study medicine at university after taking a gap year working as a volunteer in a hospital in Sri Lanka where he had a large extended family. While in school, he took part in many extracurricular activities, all connected to medicine and preparation for university. For example, he completed extra modules in medical imaging and biomedical ethics facilitated by university students; worked in a pharmacy for work experience, and volunteered to help out with maths in lower years at school. He also attended preparatory sessions for prospective students at two London universities, University College London and King's College. Realising that others completed much more extracurriculars than him, Darius secured a number of work placements for the summer holiday in different hospitals around London: in dental medicine, plastic surgery, in a renal clinic, neurosurgery, diabetes research, as well as an introductory course to medicine. For this, he had to send more than a hundred emails to doctors, whose contact details he found online, enquiring about placement opportunities. Darius seemed adept at networking: he kept in touch with other prospective students, contacted medical students through social media; he also mentioned getting information through internet chatrooms. He seemed deeply invested into becoming a doctor. When asked about his role model, he named House, the doctor character from the series with the same title. At the first interview, Darius seemed set for

studying medicine: he had already chosen the universities to apply for, completed extracurriculars, networked with relevant contacts and as he said, he prioritised his studies to get good grades.

However, one and a half years later when I met him again in March 2016, Darius was working at an optometry and was no longer aspiring to become a doctor. '*I'm in a gap year right now. So I'm just in between career paths. I want to do optometry now'*, he explained. It turned out that he did not achieve the right grades required for medical school. He still wanted to study at a Russell Group university, but first he needed to improve his A level grades. He also wanted to save up some money before starting university.

Therefore he planned to retake some of his A level exams, but he hadn't started preparing for them yet at the time of the second interview; nor did he knew which university to attend. Darius seemed content to study optometry, he found it '*convenient*': already having experience in it, he expected to find a job easier after finishing university, entertaining the idea of working at the same place while studying, then progressing on the career ladder. He also mentioned that an optometry degree takes significantly shorter time to achieve than medicine. Darius also considered studying for a biomedical degree, alternatively, depending on his A level results. This time, Darius mentioned other types of aspirations too: he wanted to travel; get married and have a '*stable family'* in the long term, as well as a '*stable job, stable career'*.

There seemed to be some curious discrepancies in Darius' narrative. On the one hand, he seemed highly committed to his medical aspirations and he clearly invested a great deal of time and energy into preparing for it, in terms of networking, securing extracurricular activities and work placements. On the other hand, he described himself as '*lazy*': '*I am pretty lazy though, I have to force myself to work'*, he said. He mentioned '*minor issues*' at school, such as being late sometimes, feeling uninterested in going to school, not doing his homework. After finishing school, he again found it difficult to start preparing for the exam re-takes.

While I did not keep in contact with Darius after the second interview, according to his social media profile, he is attending a Russell Group university now.

Evie

From an early age, Evie wanted to work with children. She completed the RESL.eu survey while studying at an FE college in North London, where she achieved several qualifications, including Level 2 diplomas is Health and Social Care and Childcare. After these, however, she

did not progress to level 3, as her tutors advised her to obtain more work experience before embarking on further studies. Evie had learning difficulties and she felt she lacked confidence in new, unusual situations.

At the time of the interviews, Evie lived with her parents and two sisters in North London. She was born in 1994, of white British background. Her father was an accountant, while her mother worked in a garden centre. One of her sisters finished university and was looking for job at the time, the other was still in school. She seemed to have a very supportive family, many friends and a long term boyfriend.

When I met her for the first interview, Evie was volunteering at an infant school and a nursery, for three and two days a week, respectively. At the time, she had been volunteering at the nursery for two and a half years, from the time she did her work placement there while at college. After finishing college, she had volunteered at other schools and nurseries too, however she was unable to secure a paid job, although she was constantly looking for one, through different agencies, and went to interviews and completed trial periods at several nurseries.

She felt supported by teachers throughout her education. In school she had a teaching assistant helping her at every lesson: '*I always constantly had a one-to-one to explain things to me in more detail when the teacher couldn't.*' She had one-to-one support in college too initially, but then it was gradually reduced, as she gained more confidence. However, the teachers were very understanding and happy to help her when she needed, as she described.

Evie also had very supportive family and friends. For example, they helped her practice for interviews. Moreover, Evie got volunteering opportunities at schools through her family's contacts, one of these being at the infant school where she stayed for years: '*my mum's friend [...] is a school teacher there so it was her idea to let me work in her class for a while to get a bit more work experience*'. This teacher also helped her with college work and writing. By the second interview, she was offered a part time temporary position there as a '*mealtime and breakfast club supervisor'*. Therefore, she stopped looking for a new job, instead tried gaining experience and confidence, and planned on getting further qualifications: '*At the moment I'm just sticking with… making sure that I feel really comfortable with the work and everything and the staff. I'm hoping to get my first aid qualifications and hopefully in the future get expanded to do my level 3.'* Evie placed a great deal of emphasis on feeling comfortable in her job and getting on well with colleagues and managers. It seemed she had found a supportive

environment there. For the time being, she felt she was not ready for a more demanding managerial role, however, she entertained the idea that later on, in the long term, she will become a manager or supervisor.

In addition to work, Evie mentioned other aspirations too: having her own house, getting married and having children; and '*travelling the world'*. Nonetheless, she connected her non-career related plans with job opportunities, explaining that she would like to work in other countries too, to get exposed to different ways of bringing up children and organising nurseries.

Evie seemed happy with her chosen occupation and felt that her studies had prepared her for the world of work. Her main aim for the time being was gaining more confidence in her work and for future interviews.

Ezra

Ezra was born in 1997 in a white British family; his father was originally from Israel. I met Ezra first in April 2015 when he was studying level 1 Science at a FE college in North London, although he already had a level 2 Science qualifications from secondary school. He was also studying level 2 Maths and English, as he had low GCSEs in these subjects. He told me that his disabilities, health conditions and learning difficulties, including ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, glaucoma, have severely affected his life.

Ezra said he always wanted to become an actor. He started attending drama sessions with his best friend as a child, and was planning to study performing arts the following year. He did not intend to go to university as he thought that talent and experience is more important when it comes to acting. As a plan B, he considered working in another job that he would enjoy, for example in an anime shop. He would have also liked to visit Japan in the future and perhaps live there. He talked at length about his close friends, but emphasized that he only had a few real friends, the rest were acquaintances.

Ezra lived with his parents and three older brothers, two of whom were working for BT. His youngest brother studied Animation at university for a year, but dropped out after, starting to work with their father instead. His father was a self-employed kitchen fitter, and his mother a mental health nurse. While his mother was very supportive of him, happy to talk through educational and career options; she got a demanding new job by the second interview, which reduced the time spent with Ezra. His father did not seem interested in such discussions: '*as long as you're healthy, you're good, then he's happy'* – Ezra explained. He seemed to have a

distant relationship with his brothers too, only talking with the youngest one. By the second interview, Ezra moved out into a 'cabin', a modified garden shed his father built for him, interacting even less with his family. He spent his days watching anime, taking care of the family's old dog.

By this time, Ezra became NEET, after leaving college without taking the exams. He needed regular treatments due to his health problems, and he reckoned the exam dates were announced while he was out of college. Although there was another opportunity to take the tests, he missed that too, instead looking after his cousins on that day. Ezra lived on his disability benefit of £300 per month. He did not apply for Jobseekers' Allowance, as he wanted to avoid the pressure of having to look for work, and only searched for job sporadically. He found it difficult looking for a job online, it seemed he struggled with using the internet.

Ezra's criteria for jobs and courses seemed rather inflexible. He only considered ones he was 'interested in'; but his range of interests was very narrow, including only drama and anime, apparently. Proximity was also important for him, he wanted to work close to home or at a familiar location like central London, as he felt apprehensive travelling to a new place. On the other hand, he did travel three times a week to Stratford to take care of his cousins. Whilst he wanted to work in the local area, he had never handed out his CVs there, or walked down the high-street looking for vacancies. Once he saw a job advert at a fast food restaurant, but then quickly decided he would not fit in.

Although acting seemed to be one of the very few things he was interested in, Ezra gave up his dream of becoming an actor as he struggled with putting effort into achieving his dream. Ezra remarked that his friend who did work hard to become an actor, hadn't made much progress either; instead he worked as an usher in a cinema. Ezra's reluctance to put effort into realising his dream might have been the result of a possibly unconscious recognition or fear that acting might be unattainable for him.

Nonetheless, Ezra was very happy with his life because he had more time to do what he was interested in. His passion was anime: '*the only inspiration I get is from anime. Depending on the anime I watch, it depends how I'm like',* he said. He described how he started playing baseball after watching a baseball themed anime; wanted to get a drivers' license when watching an anime about cars (although he did not get one in the end); he even learnt how to be '*smart with his money'* from an anime character. With a friend, he was writing a visual novel, '*for fun'*. Ezra also talked at length about an anime where the main character who is unhappy

with his life is given a red pill that transfers him back to age 16. This story made him ponder whether he would take such offer. His conclusion took me by surprise: '*I said I would, but yet again, nothing would change. I don't think I'd try as hard. If anything, if I knew, if I kept the memory, I'd try less hard because I thought I'd already done it, and it'd make me less motivated to do everything.'*

He felt he would need to go back to a much younger age, to year 5 or 6 in school, to change the present. It was that age when, he thought, his school problems started: '*I never felt like I was part of the class really. I was always behind.'* Feeling neglected, he started having conflicts with teachers, '*confrontation always got me in more trouble, more trouble',* he said. Ezra was only able to catch up in year 9, when the school introduced ability grouping. This arrangement however, was not a perfect solution either, as all the low achieving students were grouped together. Nonetheless, he received support with his studies, and better grades, as a result. After transitioning to college, he struggled with the independence expected from him, and dropped out eventually.

Ezra was only tested for dyslexia and dyspraxia in college. Although his mother tried to get him assessed while in primary and secondary school, these apparently did not have the funds. In college, he was better supported with his disabilities, but still, he was not able to engage. Nonetheless, he felt very strongly about funding for special needs in school, as he experienced the dire effects of diminishing funding: '*I'd like to, there, to be more funding for… like me, like people with special needs.*'

While he enjoyed being NEET, apparently, he felt he needed a job soon: '*As much as I was enjoying that, I don't know, I feel like I need something.'* However, he did not seem to have any concrete aspirations, and accordingly, no plans either: *'I just take life as it comes at the moment but, I don't know, I might start looking ... asking my friends if there's any jobs around. Because like I said, the internet, I just don't know how to look on it.'* Giving up his acting dreams, he seemed content to take any job that it is not too inconvenient: '*To be honest, now I just want a job that's either not too far or in Central London that I would actually enjoy.'*

Flora

Flora was born in Hungary in 1997 and arrived in Britain at the age of 13. Initially she lived with her mother only, her father staying behind in Hungary; but by the time of the second interview in March 2016, her father joined them in London too. Flora's mother worked as a shop assistant in a Hungarian shop in London owned by her uncle, while her father worked as

a builder, at a cab company, then as a delivery driver. Flora felt well supported by her parents. Although they did not speak English well and did not understand the English education system, they provided emotional and financial support to Flora, expected her to study well and go to university, and apparently, they could even help with Maths.

When she arrived in London, Flora was bullied at school. She became friends with the '*wrong people*', as she called them, which had a temporary negative effect on her school engagement and relationship with her mother: *'I went out a lot, she worked long hours, we didn't have much time for each other*', she explained. However, Flora soon realised that her studies will suffer if she continues these friendships. So she consciously broke up these relationships, developed new friendships and managed to follow her aspirations. As a result, she got closer with her mother too: '*we spent more time together, talked through things. We trust each other more*.'

Flora achieved good GCSE results, especially in Maths and IT. Accordingly, she was advised by the school career adviser to study these subjects further. However, Flora was more interested in media, so she picked IT, music and media for A levels. She was very pleased with the teachers at her school, having an especially good relationship with her media tutor, who gave her encouragement and advice. Flora planned to study media at university, then she wanted to work in the film or television industry as an editor. Alternatively, she also considered becoming a teacher if a career in media proved difficult to achieve. She got interested in teaching during her school work experience, teaching media for younger students for about two months: 'I *really liked that the kids were listening to me… And I can pass my knowledge to them*', Flora enthused.

In addition to teaching at school, Flora completed a short course at Channel 4, which further convinced her to study media. She also worked in her uncle's shop as a '*business secretary/ agent/ assistant*' during the summer holiday, answering phone calls and doing admin. In the weekends, she helped out her mother in the shop, baking and selling pastry. In her free time, Flora liked creating short YouTube videos. She also liked music, and has been playing piano for eight years at the time. She wanted to continue that too, but only as a hobby.

When I met her for the second time in March 2016, Flora was studying media at university, as she intended to. She had many Hungarian friends both in London and back at home, and seemed to successfully develop new friendships at the university as well. Her aspiration was still to work in the media industry, however, her attention shifted to sound mixing. She also wanted

to travel, ideally to the US, to further her career: '*I would definitely try and go to visit America and see the opportunities available.*'

As a first year university student, her aspirations seemed less concrete than while at school. Although she hadn't come up with a well-developed strategy yet of what to do after graduation, Flora seemed to have a good understanding of the steps needed to be taken to get a job in media; she was well aware that she needed work experience beforehand.

During the second interview, she mentioned being at the beginning of a same-sex relationship. While at the first interview Flora mentioned having a family among her primary aspiration, it seemed, in the intervening years, this plan got to the backseat: *'I don't know. I never really think about having a family. Maybe in ten years' time',* she said.

Flora was optimistic about her future: '*I live in the centre of the film industry and TV industry. [...] London has so many opportunities available',* she said. She was confident that if she worked hard she will get a well-paying job in media, that will allow her to buy a property. Although modest and unassuming in general, Flora mentioned with some pride that her parents are *'definitely proud of me for making it so far.'*

Greg

When I first met him in April 2015, Greg was studying for a Level 2 ICT (Information and Computer Technology) diploma in a FE college in North London. He lived with his mother and two brothers, with no support from and little contact with his father. None of his parents had any qualifications. Greg was caring for his mother; as he said, she was 'schizophrenic bipolar', depressed and also had physical disability.

Although he was only 17 years old at the time, Greg had already experienced poverty, family breakdown, multiple migrations and educational failure. He placed all his hopes and plans in one basket: getting a qualification and as a result, a good job that provides financial security later on: '*at the moment the one thing that's important is the education because that's my one route to money. Money is the one thing we never had*' – he explained.

Greg's schooling was disrupted by moving to Spain when he was 8 years old. After his parents' divorce, the father's side of the family wanted to put the two younger children in care, while bringing up his older brother. To avoid this, his maternal grandparents, who were living in Spain at the time, offered to help raising the children, so his mother moved there with them. However, they were very poor. The mother worked as a part time cleaner and '*was hard for*

her to keep a stable job', while the children attended a local '*run-down school'*. Greg's school performance declined and he had to repeat several classes, possibly due to language issues as well. Greg felt he was labelled as being disengaged from education and having no aspirations early on. Therefore, he moved to another school, but there he got in with the '*wrong crowd'* and his attainment further deteriorated. '*I just let people influence me too much, I think, and then I just didn't want to do education anymore, because I didn't see the benefits'*, he told me. In the end, he left education with no qualifications and started working as a gardener in Spain. *'I didn't pass anything, not even English, I didn't even pass English!',* he said.

At this point, at the age of 15, Greg realised his life was going nowhere in Spain. He noticed, that his older friends all lived very precarious lives working as builders and DJs. However, with no qualifications, he did not see any alternative in Spain, therefore he convinced his mother to return to the UK: '*I didn't want to do that, I didn't see that for myself so I just decided to come here and make something out of myself, you know, just wanted something better*', Greg explained. He described at length how difficult this decision and the actual move was: he had to live behind all his friends and the life he knew, and then go back to education in London: '*I had a life and I had loads of friends and I was always going out every day. Then I moved here and I didn't really go out and… I didn't know anyone and I wasn't doing education for a while, so it was hard the first year*.'

Nonetheless, he was convinced they made the right decision and got a '*second chance'* in the UK. First, Greg enrolled on a 'bridging course' at the FE college, which is specifically for students who are above 16 years of age but without any qualifications. Here, he achieved good grades, got interested in computers, and then enrolled on an ICT course. During the lifetime of the RESL.eu project, he finished level 3 extended diploma in ICT. '*For me it's worked out well because… in Spain I never would have thought I'd be good at computers. I never even touched a computer in Spain'* – he reflected. Greg felt he received a lot of support at the college, especially from his ICT teacher and personal tutor, and they provided him with career advice and relevant work experience. He also earned some money by helping friends and family with computer-related issues.

His older brother was studying cookery at the same college, then got a job as a chef in Central London; while his younger brother was still in secondary school, wanting to become a carpenter. Greg was worried about his younger brother, he saw him committing the same mistakes as he

did before: getting on with the '*wrong crowd'* and not paying attention to his studies. Moreover, his younger brother also had '*trouble with the police'*.

Greg aspired to become a system administrator, or, as a back-up plan, an IT technician. He had looked up carefully how to achieve his career goals: '*I've looked into everything. I've made sure that before I've decided what I'm going to do in the future I need to make sure that I can do it you know and that I know where to go and what to do.*' So he was aware he needed a tertiary degree in computer science to become a system administrator. However, he did not think that would be financially viable for him. Instead, he wanted to do a level 4 apprenticeship initially. Although he was very debt-averse at the first interview – as working class young people often are, by the second interview he realised that doing an apprenticeship would actually be less feasible for him than enrolling on a university course, because apprenticeships are paid much below minimum wage, while he could take a student loan at university. Plus, he explained that without a degree he can only become an IT technician, and earn about half of what he could as a system administrator.

Greg's apprenticeship plans might have been influenced by his girlfriend's experiences. She wanted to become a dental hygienist and started an apprenticeship in dental nursing, earning very low wages there. They had been together for years after meeting at college and it seemed they provided both emotional and learning support to each other. Greg seemed to have good, supportive relationships with a diverse range of people: his mother and grandparents, girlfriend, new and old friends and some teachers.

He came across as very motivated, well-informed, hard-working and articulate. He was well aware of the challenges in front of him: these were mostly financial. He worried about his grades too, because he would not have had money for exam retakes if he failed. Greg also reflected on larger socio-political issues; he was very critical of the conservative government, the constant changes and funding cuts in education: *'The government want to make more cuts to education which is going to make things harder for people like me especially… They don't consider students like me, you know.*' He hoped for a Labour win at the 2015 general election, and he was very disappointed with the results.

While he appreciated the educational opportunities he got in the UK, Greg did not like the country: '*I haven't had good experiences with this country even from before I moved to Spain*'. He dreamed about moving away to somewhere hot, Australia or South America. As he explained, coming back was only a strategic move to return to education: '*England is the only*

option for me because I was English, so I was, go for it, get the education out the way and then see what happens.'

Greg's idyllic dreams of the future – *'just a big house really and just in the sun… a big house and away from, like, everything I used to know'* – and his belief in the transformative power of education provided the motivation and energy for him in his very challenging circumstances.

Hope

I met Hope for the first time in December 2015 at an IT company based in South London. She had just started her level 2 apprenticeship course in Business Administration there. Before that, she was enrolled on an FE college course in arts. However, she dropped out soon after in order to take up the apprenticeship. She explained that arts, drama and music were her interests in school, but then she decided on enhancing her employability instead, an unusual and but mature decision at the age of 16.

Hope did not plan on going to university, as she felt she has already spent a very long time in education, and was yearning to start working. Hope wanted to learn general business administration skills that will enable her to work in a wide variety of businesses: *'I want to be able to give my CV to kind of anybody, I don't want it to be restricted… So with this, me doing business admin, that's any sector really.*' Instead of going to university, she intended to complete higher level apprenticeship courses and gain work experience.

Hope was from a second generation Black Caribbean family and lived with her mother, whose job was importing and exporting designer clothes. She studied arts at university when Hope was in primary school. Hope did not mention having much contact with her father, a '*reggae kind of DJ'*. She also lost contact with her older sister who worked as a teaching assistant. Hope had good relationship with her two older brothers and their families; one a recruitment manager at Microsoft, the other worked at a charity.

Religion seemed to play a very important role in Hope's life. She was a Jehovah's Witness and attended Kingdom Hall events at least twice a week. In addition, she spent her weekends doing voluntary work, giving out leaflets on the street and teaching people about her religion. She received training for this at the Kingdom Hall, she felt this also improved her interpersonal and communication skills. Hope seemed to have very good relationship with Kingdom Hall members, young and older, she felt they provided essential emotional and informational support to her.

She described having '*two sets of friends'*: the ones from school and the others from the Kingdom Hall. Her friends from school all went to study at A levels or college. Over time, Hope's relationship with them became more distant; as their schedules were different, regular meetings became difficult to arrange. On the other hand, Hope got more and more involved in the Kingdom Hall, meeting friends from there and doing more voluntary work. '*I spend more time [with them] and we have much in common as well'* – she said.

Hope attributed her maturity to having adult friends, and being able to learn from their life experiences: *'I have friends who are older than me... I listen to stuff they'd say, little things, I'd put them together and I was able to make my own decision.'* In the Kingdom Hall, they discussed how many young people finish university and are still unable to secure a job, having no work experience. Hope was encouraged to try apprenticeships: '*they always said apprenticeship's kind of the way forward.'* Her brother also advised her to consider practical and financial reasons. Hope described her mother as very supportive and allowing her to make her own choices. Only her teachers were against the apprenticeship: '*My teachers didn't really like the fact that I was going to go to apprenticeship, because my school was connected to a sixth form… My pastoral manager, she kept saying, "you're too smart to do an apprenticeship and you're too intelligent, you shouldn't do it."'*

She highlighted the positives of apprenticeship repeatedly, comparing it to mainstream education: having her weekends free instead of working as she was already earning money during the week, having more time for socialising, gaining work experience. She described how all her friends envied her position. Hope was very happy with her choice at the first interview.

However, she soon realised that she enrolled on an exploitative apprenticeship where she was not receiving any training. Apart from the director, the whole company was comprised of apprentices, carefully selected for their pre-existing IT skills. They worked at the company four days a week, without any training and assessment; relying on each other (and Google) to solve problems. *'So it was… like work, so if I actually went into a place of work, it was like that.*' The only difference to proper employment was that she was paid well below minimum wage, as apprentices mostly are.

After half a year and many arguments with the employer, eventually Hope – and the majority of apprentices - left this apprenticeship. She reported the case to the FE college the apprenticeship was associated with, but she had not received any assistance from them either;

both the company director and the college tried to shift the blame on the other. Resourceful as she was, Hope soon found an online training provider, and enrolled on yet another Business Administration training course. She also managed to secure another apprenticeship at a social enterprise company.

Although Hope had good GCSE results, both apprenticeships courses she started were at level 2 – the equivalent of 5 A*-C GCSEs. So not only did she lose an academic year, dropping out of the first apprenticeship without receiving any certificate, she was heading to stay at the same educational level as she was right after her GCSEs after two years of apprenticeships. In addition, she was reaching 18, after which she needed to pay to study further. Even so, after all these negative experiences, Hope kept her positive outlook on apprenticeships.

Her future plans have changed somewhat between the two interviews: she no longer mentioned higher level apprenticeships, she was not even sure whether she will complete a level 3 one. She considered staying at the company as an employee, a membership assistant, after completing her apprenticeship. She also became interested in event management and hoped she will have opportunities to train in that as well.

Hope was perhaps the only participant who did not frame her future plans in terms of work, who seemed to have an alternative vision of the future. Although very conscientious, hard-working and eager to learn, for her, having a career and earning money was not the ultimate goal in life. Instead, she prioritised spiritual growth and spending time with friends and family: '*we [friends from the Kingdom Hall] don't want to work our whole lives and that's just the purpose of it. We want to find joy and be able to associate with each other'* – she explained.

She deliberately aimed for a simple life: '*a house and be able to pay my bills, being able to save up still, have a savings account and just have a simplified life… to be able to go to work and come home and have time to spend with my family.'* She did not want to own many things so she can travel to do missionary work, for example in Cuba and South America. She has already started learning Spanish and Portuguese.

As described earlier, Hope presented herself as making practical educational and career choices, focusing less on what she was interested in, and more on what provides good future work opportunities. Not interpreting work/ career as her main passion and the principal source of identity and meaning in life, might have taken the pressure off these choices, and helped making practical decisions easier.

Hugh

I met Hugh through a council officer who was working with NEETs. Hugh, of white Irish background, was nearly 18 at the first interview. He left education without any qualifications and had been NEET for several months. For the second interview (when he was still a NEET), I met him close to his home, in a relatively deprived North London suburb. He lived with his mother, who was also unemployed. On the short walk from the tube station to the café where we conducted the interview, Hugh was stopped several times by local residents, people he knew. They all seemed intoxicated although it was only 10 o'clock in the morning. A gaunt woman who aged much too early, asked for money. Hugh gave a few coins. She then asked for his phone, so we waited until she made a phone call from his phone. Then, a few meters away, an older man called out for Hugh asking for money and alcohol. Both were insistent, demanding. I was relieved when we reached the café.

Hugh did not like school. He felt disengaged from the curriculum, detested the half hour travel time, the intensity of studying: '*just too full on. I think it was just the five days a week, I couldn't deal with it... I just hated it.*' His dislike for school started in years 9-10, at the beginning of the GCSE period, when it became too difficult for him. Hugh could not see the relevance of schooling to future jobs: *'They don't teach you nothing that you're going to use in the outside world' – he said.*

Nonetheless, he felt that he received adequate support: '*I did have quite a bit of help at school, to be honest.'* Initially, the school '*cut down'* his school hours so he did not have to go in five days a week. Then, when his attendance still deteriorated, he was sent to a close-by youth centre instead of school, to avoid expulsion. Here, he attended vocational courses - cookery, sports and fitness, media – for two years. He seemed to be more interested in these subjects, but still, he was not entirely sure what level these courses were. Apparently, he achieved some vocational qualifications, but he never went back to the centre to pick them up. He also missed his GCSE exams, apparently because of a mix up about the location of an exam.

After leaving school with no qualifications, Hugh attended a plumbing course at the local FE collage, but dropped out before completing it: '*It wasn't for me. I didn't want to do it. I only joined it because I left school, I had nothing else to do. But then I preferred just to do something more like… find a job or something'* – he explained. However, he could not secure a job although looking for work on the high street, in shops and restaurants, as well as applying online. He found online applications difficult because he did not have a computer at home.

Also, many online applications asked for GCSE results, without those, he was not even able to complete the forms. In the end, he only worked odd jobs through a friend of his mother: '*like work in driveways, painting, decorating, a mixture of everything. Helping a few times.'*

To my repeated questions about his future plans, he replied with apparently contradictory statements. For example, he mentioned being interested in apprenticeships: '*I've been trying to look for apprenticeships. But it's hard because I have no GCSEs*.' While he was aware that his lack of qualifications is an impediment for future studies, he seemed ambivalent on improving his qualifications: '*Well, I want to get my GCSEs. But I think now it's too late, I'd just prefer to get a job.*' Hugh felt trapped: he hated the idea of having to study again, he wanted to work instead: '*I just want to work now. Just get into the workplace, getting to an adult soon. Just need to get a job*.' But he could not do that without qualifications.

When I met Hugh the second time, he was planning to enrol on a college course again, '*plumbing or electrical or something'*. He said he liked doing manual work: *'When I work with my mum's friend... I like that type of work, labourer.'* He felt he matured in the meantime, and would finish the course this time around: '*I'm grown up more, like, matured now and I know I need to do it.'* However, this being in late September, he was already running out of time to enrol, it seemed to me.

Hugh wanted to have a nice life and a job: *'Working with a good job… family, living somewhere nice…*', but did not mention any specific aspirations or plans. The only strategy he could think of was similarly generic: '*working hard'.* He could not identify any support available to him and felt it is only down to him to succeed: '*It's all how you do it yourself, to be honest. Once you've left school and you're out there, well they don't care.'*

While being NEET, Hugh went on a 12 week course organised by the local authority which prepared young people NEET for apprenticeships, to be taken after the course. He found the course very useful, as, for the first time, he got help with writing his CV, interview techniques, job-search and ongoing one-to-one support from a council officer. However, Hugh was not able to take advantage of the apprenticeship offer, as few weeks before the end of the course he was stabbed in the back five times. He was hospitalised and thankfully, he fully recovered. Apparently, he was at the '*wrong place, wrong time',* and a random argument with a stranger resulted in him being stabbed. Shockingly, his assailant was never apprehended, although Hugh had seen him on the street after. '*He got away with it. The police, they don't do nothing… The police say there's nothing they can do. They can't find out who he is. They can't find him. But*

I've seen him so many times', Hugh said with resignation. By the second interview, his attacker moved back to Albania, apparently to escape criminal justice.

Hugh mentioned poverty, drugs and gangs as the most important challenges facing young people in London. Apparently, most people he knew were selling drugs and/or were in gangs, but he strongly denied being involved himself: '*Oh no, it's not me, like, it's not me. It's just, around this area, just in general, it's a lot, you see it a lot. Everyone that's aged between like 14 to 20 or whatever.'* Nonetheless, he talked at length about the negative effects of using drugs: '*It just messes with your head, doesn't it? It makes you lazy. It sends you down the wrong path',* which seemed to sum up his life, actually. Again, just like when I asked him about any changes in schools that could support students like him better, he could not see any solution: *'There's nothing you can do, is there? It's part of life.'*

Hugh only had a few close friends, from his childhood. They were the same age, also Irish, and lived in the neighbourhood. Hugh seemed wary of human relationships: '*I don't really communicate with many people*', he said at the first interview. By the second interview, he became even more reticent: '*I'm not a people person.'*

Hugh seemed to have an insular life, living with his mother, with very little social contact. He did not attend any regular activities, only occasionally played football and basketball in the park when the weather was good. I asked how he spends his time, he replied: '*Boring… Just yeah…When my friends are at school or college, I'm just doing nothing. Then whenever I could, I'm just still doing nothing.*'

James

James, from white English background, was 16 years old at the first interview. He was taking part in a 3 months long programme organised for young people NEET by a West London council.

James left school without qualifications and could not find any jobs. His best grade was a D in GCSE English and he could not remember his other subjects. Over the years, he attended three different secondary schools but was expelled from all for truanting, and ended up in an alternative education unit for vulnerable young people with challenging behaviour. Here he found the support he felt was missing in previous schools: '*they were really supportive and like they've got a really unique way and they connect with the students more on an one-to-one basis*.' Overall however, James did not like school. He complained about having to study

subjects he was not interested in, the limited range of subjects on offer, having to follow rules he considered meaningless, and being told what to do in general: '*school, it was never my place. [...] I hate writing when someone is telling me "write this". But I'll go home and write pages and pages*', he explained.

In addition, James had difficulties navigating the social landscape of secondary schools. For this, he blamed not having enough money to follow fashion trends: '*they all think about wanting to wear a certain type of clothes [...] and I never had the money to keep up with all of that.'* James wanted to make friends eagerly but his attempts seemed to have misfired which upset him a great deal: *'now I realise I should've been like more strong willed [...] and just not care about them people so much. But for some reason it just got to me then.'* This was one of the issues why he stopped attending school and was wary of returning to education: '*it just put me off education to be honest.*' He did not understand why he was unpopular: *'I don't think it's me because I like to meet people [...] I was quite loud and confident and that. I was quite confident when other people were still shy*', he described his attempts to make friends. While these did not work in school, he felt he was able to get on better with older people, in a work environment:

> '*That's why I feel more ready to work because whenever I went into the work environment people were so much more adult. [...] In high school I remember everyone seemed to act quite immature and follow silly trends and stuff like that. [...] When I went into the work environment everyone had grown out of that. [...] They just wanted to make money.'*

After GCSEs, James enrolled on a level 1 sports BTEC course at an FE college as he wanted to become a freelance personal trainer. But the same pattern of truanting continued and he dropped out after 6 months. James complained of poverty and not being able to afford clothes to go to college; so instead of further studies he wanted to earn money: '*I wanted to get money because… I'm finding it hard to find five different pairs of clothes every day.'* Although he applied to a multitude of jobs, apprenticeships and traineeships - *'IT, like marketing, resources, and also like programming, and just like reception jobs'* - the majority required level 2 qualifications that he did not have. So he only had some on-off jobs such as leaflet delivery and gardening, but stopped doing them because they did not pay well: '*I found that it wasn't enough to really get clothes and that.'*

After a few months of being NEET, James enrolled on a council-led programme for local NEETs that his friend was attending too. The course helped with job-search, CV writing, getting ready for interviews and offered emotional support and voluntary work. Their food and travel expenses were paid, which apparently helped him staying on the course: '*It seems like such a small thing, but it's actually such a big thing*.' At the end of the course, James came across as more confident, he was knowledgeable about job-search websites, and he attended numerous job fairs. While he acknowledged that the course '*was good. I thought it helped me progress to where I need to be',* he seemed to dismiss the help he received and stressed his prior job-readiness: '*I thought I was ready to work before I started [...] For me, I just gained a lot of experience from it, on top of everything else. Putting voluntary down on a CV always helps.'*

At the first interview, James lived with his mother and younger sister. His father had left the family, and James did not want to have any relationship with him. Family problems affected him severely in previous years, he explained, which also impacted on his school engagement. These problems also made his mother ill, so she was not able to work but was receiving disability benefits. James only had kind words about his mother: he felt he could go to her with any problems, she was always supportive and understanding of him. However, their relationship was tense and problematic; and James took responsibility for it: *'my mum did everything she could to support me and she's an amazing parent. My sister is in school and she does actually get really good grades and that. It was just me',* he stressed. His mother was '*really disappointed'* with him moving so much between schools and tried hard to convince James to attend school, to no avail: '*I would literally just turn around and say, "I'm not going, you can't make me, you can't physically move me" and I just wouldn't go.*'

By the second interview, James became homeless, after his mother was fined for his truanting and arguments with her intensified. Their fights negatively affected his sister, of whom James was very fond, so he did not want to move back home. Instead he was looking for sheltered accommodation with the help of the local council, while living temporarily with an aunt. Apparently, he moved out of the house before, and living apart normalised his relationship with his mother back then. James' account of these events revealed how unemployment or being NEET poisons family relationships: '*when I was working or when I was doing the course me and my mum didn't argue. But it's just when I was sitting there doing nothing, I was unhappy because I had no money and I was getting depressed, to be honest. It was making me snappy at everyone.'* Nonetheless, James felt well supported by his family. He was especially close to

his grandmother who worked at the local council and alerted him to vacancies and apprenticeships there.

In spite of all these problems, James had unflinching self-confidence which only seemed to increase between the two interviews. He felt he had natural talent for sports, music and computers; and he was convinced he could easily get '*an A at least*' in English GCSE if he went back to college. Having had several phone interviews, he felt he performed very well but was '*unlucky*' and did not have '*enough references*'. At both interviews he stressed his commitment to secure a job or an apprenticeship.

James' aspiration was to become a self-employed personal trainer like his godfather (with whom he rarely met) and he was working out every day. He mentioned other interests too, computers at the first interview and music, writing and performing rap, at the second. James hoped that in 10 years' time he will '*be able to help my mum out financially a lot more than I do at the moment and obviously have a lot more qualifications to my name*'. He felt very optimistic about his job opportunities:

> '*I'm a confident person and I see certain people that aren't as confident as me. So I think… you've got to have that attitude that I'm definitely going to achieve my job. I'm definitely going to get the job I want. So that's the way I look at. There's no way I can't get it.*'

According to online information, James became an apprentice at the local council soon after the second interview, then he got a job there as a business administrator working in a music related department.

Kurt

Kurt was born in 1994 in a white British family, with a number of health issues, including cerebral palsy and epilepsy. At 13, he had a major brain surgery to improve his condition; at the time he was having 15 or more epileptic seizures a day, which severely limited his life. After the operation, his condition improved. While in school, Kurt experienced a lot of bullying because of his visible disabilities.

When I first met him in June 2015, Kurt lived with his mother, a teaching assistant supporting disabled children but unemployed at the time. By the second interview, she became very ill with epilepsy and had been in intensive care for weeks. Kurt's parents were divorced but he

kept in touch with his father, a mechanical engineer. His sister was a primary school teacher, and he also had a 7 year old half-brother on his father's side.

Although achieving good result in college and having conditionally been accepted to university, Kurt dropped out of his children's nursing course the year before the interview. He had severe depression:

> *'I was, to be honest, for a while not doing anything cause my health was so bad, I was just trying really to build myself and get myself back on my feet cause I was in quite a bad place with illness. [...] It was a mixture of a lot of things, it was deep depression which started when I had sort of family members die and others getting ill on top of that[36]. It just, I was trying to fight for so long and then, eventually, it just got on top of me.'*

At the time, the college was going through a major reorganisation, which affected the quality of teaching and support. For instance, no-one tried to find out what happened when Kurt dropped out.

Kurt appeared very determined and proud, intelligent, self-deprecating and frustrated in his ambitions. He seemed reluctant to ask for or even just accept support. Kurt emphasized that he managed to get better on his own without asking for help or going to counselling. He was keen to get back to education: first completing an access course to nursing, for which he had already received an offer, then going to university. He wanted to become a paediatric nurse initially, to make a difference in sick children's lives. He already had experience in this field:

> *'a lot of nurseries and primary schools but last year I did a placement in a special needs school and from that was an 8 months placement, twice a week, and I really enjoyed that. I think that was what…really cemented in me that I prefer to work with disadvantaged children.*'

In spite of all his medical conditions – for example, he was told at birth that he will never be able to walk, not only did he start walking at 4, but then got into sports and became a judo player: *'Sport is my life. I live and breathe sport. I'm in the gym or on the judo mat every day',* he explained.

[36] Kurt's cousin had a terminal degenerative illness, although I did not ask whether he referred to this cousin here.

By the second interview, Kurt's life changed direction. He became a European judo champion, his confidence increased and he changed his future plans. Realising at the Access to Nursing course that his disability might impede him becoming a nurse, he decided to study Sport Science at university instead. He left the Access to Nursing course halfway through, and got an offer at a London university. However, he still wanted to help sick and disabled children, only in a different role:

> *'I've learnt, myself, different methods in the gym to help me build muscle. I can bring that forward to help other people. It's just what I'm meant to do and the second I made the decision and I made the switch, every day that went past, it became more and more clear that that was what I was meant to do.'*

Kurt seemed to have many friends from the neighbourhood, school, college and judo. Many of them went to university and Kurt felt frustrated that they will be finishing their degree when he will be starting his own. Although preferring to solve problems on his own - *'I'm the one doing it, at the end of the day',* Kurt discussed his education and career options with friends to some extent: '*Friends more than anyone. […] I tend not to talk to family members.'* Kurt felt his family would not have supported his decision of changing tracks, unlike his friends. But even his friends seemed to notice Kurt's propensity to dropping out of courses and leaving behind ambitions that he ardently pursued before. Kurt however, felt that he found his calling this time, the field where he can actualise himself, help others and pass on his knowledge. According to his Facebook profile, he persisted with Sport Science. At the time of writing this thesis, he is studying towards his degree.

Kurt believed in the power of positivity. He felt his drive was his only means to overcome his disability:

> *'If you have strong enough inner strength and believe in yourself, nothing can stop you. There are impacts around you that can get in your way, but bottom line, if you have the inner strength and belief, personally, and hunger to get where you want to be, then I don't think there's anything that can stop you. You find a way to climb the wall, essentially.'*

Maria

Maria was 19 years old when I met her in December 2015 at a North London college, where she was completing an apprenticeship in childcare. She was born in Romania as one of four

sisters, in a previously prosperous mining region which experienced extreme economic downturn from the 1990s onwards. Her father left the family when she was one year old. Her mother, an accountant, came to the UK illegally so she can support her children. The four girls lived with their grandmother during this time, and did not meet their mother face-to-face for three years: '*three years... I was six when she left, and then she came back when I was… yeah.*' When Romania joined the EU in 2007, the family was able to reunite: '*she couldn't work with four girls, and she had to come here, so she worked really hard for us, to bring us here. Once Romanian people were free to travel, she brought all of us here.'* At the time, Maria did not speak English and was bullied in school and called a Gypsy, as it seemed children equated Romanians with Roma. With her fair complexion and blue eyes, Maria did not conform to the stereotypical Roma look. She explained to me she was Romanian but was shocked and hurt by the discrimination Roma people were subjected to.

Maria came across as very humble, unassuming, bright and down-to-earth. Her interest in childcare stemmed from the years she was taking care of her older sisters' children in the weekends while they worked. Both older sisters were married, one an accountant, the other a sales assistant. Maria lived with her mother who at the time was a chef, and her younger sister who was doing her A levels and wanted to go to university. Maria worked extremely hard: doing a full time apprenticeship, studying in the evenings, babysitting in the weekends, with no free time at all to meet up with friends or do anything for leisure. In fact, she was only able to meet me for the repeat interview bringing her nephew with her. Maria wanted to become a nursery teacher, perhaps one day opening her own nursery. She also considered becoming a teaching assistant as she has heard that her Level 3 Childcare qualification allows that: '*it opens some doors [..] I can't be a teacher but I can be, like, a teaching assistant or a nursery nurse or something to do with early years.'*

Before the apprenticeship, Maria completed A levels with good grades and was advised to go to university. However, she knew early on that HE is too expensive for her. She considered completing an apprenticeship already after GCSEs, but her teachers convinced her to do A levels first, to keep the option open for university studies in the future. She was told, apparently, that it is not possible to progress to HE after apprenticeship studies – which is not correct. Anyway, Maria did not intend to study any further. However, when she realised that it is possible to gain degree-level qualifications through apprenticeship, while working and earning, she become more open to continue her studies.

I still find it emotionally draining to read the interviews with Maria. Although these were conducted in English, I think I understood the connotations of her words easier. Coming from the same country, I was able to read between the lines, to understand more about her background. I lived through the 1990s and early 2000s in Romania, and so Maria's story gained a symbolic relevance. It brought up the existential dread of that era, the economic collapse, poverty, families torn apart, children growing up without their parents, the fear, vulnerability and exploitation of working illegally; experiences too common for many Romanians.

Before the interview, Maria took part in a focus group with her fellow apprentices (as part of the RESL.eu project), so I already had some information about her. On the way to the interview room, I explained that I, too, was from Romania originally. Given the ongoing interethnic issues between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority I am from, I was wary of sharing this information, but I decided it was more honest this way. It turned out, Maria's father was Hungarian too. I found out later, during the interview, that he abandoned his family with four young children and left them in a desperate situation. Nonetheless, Maria still hoped to get in touch with him, in vain, it seemed. '*I went to travel to my country, he didn't really... Like, I wanted to see him, but he couldn't come. He couldn't come to see me...*' Maria gasped for air and was not able to finish the sentence.

At the time of the second interview, Maria was finishing her exams. She was keen to get a permanent position:

> '*I would really like something permanent, like, with a contract to know that I have set hours. […] But this, where I'm working now, I did talk to them, they said they're going to give me a contract, but they don't offer hours. They want hours to be flexible, and that's not what I want. I want something to be, like, permanent.*'

Mina

Mina, a bright, ambitious and energetic young woman, was born in the Netherlands in 1997 to parents originally from Iraq. She arrived in the UK at 11 years old. Mina had a very supportive family, with a political analyst father who worked as a manager in Arabic social media companies; a permanent make-up artist mother and a younger brother. Her extended family lived in the UK, the Netherlands and Iraq, and she was in contact with many of them. For instance, she had cousins who attended top universities in London, one of them worked in a bank. She was Mina's first port of call for advice about education and careers. Her father and cousin were Mina's role models, and she wanted to study Law or Political Economics.

However, initially she had low grades, even failed some of her subjects. Mina completed the RESL.eu survey in a secondary school that was in the process of being closed down by Ofsted. As a result, the school had few subjects on offer and Mina felt students did not receive enough support, with teachers and supplementary staff leaving the school in droves. So, she looked for a better performing school through her friends, and by the first interview, she changed schools. She retook one academic year and her grades improved significantly. She finished secondary school with top grades and got accepted to study Law at a good university in London.

Initially, Mina formulated her aspirations in terms of the subjects she wanted to study, while keeping her career options open. Between the two interviews, she completed several work experiences and internships, and decided she was more interested in Law than banking. By the second interview, Mina had more exact career aspirations: she wanted to become a solicitor. When choosing universities, she took into account the subjects, but also the extra-curriculars such as languages offered, and the mix of students at campus, as she wanted to socialise with young people studying different subjects. Although she planned to stay in London, she entertained the idea of travelling before settling down: *'I do want some work abroad',* she said.

Mina seemed to have many friends and she was adept at making new connections. For five years, Mina volunteered as a teaching assistant at an Arabic Saturday school. She went there to meet other Arabs and Muslims as she attended a Church of England school, improve her Arabic and enhance her CV. However, it seemed she had disagreements with other staff about what constitutes good conduct. Mina wore a hijab, and at the first interview, she had beautiful make-up. She had a diverse range of friends in terms of gender, religion and ethnicity. Some thought she should be more modest.

> *'They're really nice, but they're a bit unfair to certain people; I was one of those people. […] When you go to a Muslim school, Islamic school, they have specific rules and regulations of course. They weren't strict, like "Don't do this, don't do that", it was a mixed school, boys and girls mixed and everything, it wasn't that strict. But when you're the worker, because the students look up to you as the worker, the helper, you have to dress in a specific way, not wear too much makeup, not wear like nail polish, stuff like that. […] When I first started I was a bit of a tomboy so I dressed a bit boyish and everything, and then they complained about that […]. And I started to like not wear nail polish any more, […] and my makeup became way less, like I don't really wear much.[…] It was just eye makeup, but that was like "Wow", because boys will look and*

> *say, "Oh, wow, she looks nice", and that's what they don't want. Although we mix, they don't want boys to look and say…'*

Although appreciative for the opportunities there, she felt unfairly treated and her parents agreed with her. By the second interview she stopped volunteering there.

Mina had high aspirations: she wanted a career as a solicitor, a financially comfortable life, to travel around the world, but also to set up a charity to help war-torn Arabic countries. She was also keen on having a family and children later on. Mina strongly believed that one needs to follow their passion, do something they are interested in, and that will guarantee success and wellbeing. As mentioned earlier, she was accepted to her first choice university and she is studying Law at the time of writing.

Reuben

Reuben, from Black Caribbean background, was 18 years old when I met him in December 2015. Two months before, he started a level 3 Clinical Assistant Technologist apprenticeship in a South London hospital. Although a relatively new scheme, this apprenticeship had very good track record in resulting in an actual job in the NHS. It provided training in the management, maintenance and use of medical equipment in different clinical and technical environments, on a 4 monthly rotational basis.

Before enrolling on the apprenticeship, Reuben finished a level 3 Health and Social Care course in college with double distinction. He seemed very proud of his achievement, since he '*put in a lot of effort'*. *'I'm not really a studying person, but it has to be done at the same time. I think that's my biggest challenge*', he explained. He failed math at GCSEs and, as he said, he was never a '*top-set student*' at school, but he did not get any support there with his studies. He described his school as '*very unorganised'*, with mostly supply teachers and only a few permanent teachers, themselves staying only for a short time. The apprenticeship appealed to him more because he preferred practical training, being '*more of a hands-on person.'* Furthermore, he liked getting paid while studying too.

Although at school Reuben did not get additional support, his mother made sure he performed well academically: '*my mum was very on top of me with my work and she communicated with the school a lot about homework and about coursework.*' Reuben was grateful for this: '*she helped me to motivate*' he said. His mother worked in the education, employment and skills department of the local council, and at a local college before that. So she was well placed to

provide valuable advice to Reuben regarding his educational choices. It was her who found out about the apprenticeship first and encouraged Reuben to apply for it.

Prior to the apprenticeship, Reuben completed a work experience at the same hospital, over several months. Again, his mother was instrumental in securing this opportunity, through which Reuben got acquainted with staff members involved in the apprenticeship scheme and had a taster of the work. Although initially he was not thrilled to spend the summer working in the hospital, retrospectively he realised how useful it was: *'it made me grow a bit more as a person'*, he concluded.

Although he enjoyed the course and his work, at the first interview, Reuben was not convinced he is going to stay at the hospital after completing his apprenticeship. While he did not rule it out, he preferred to keep his option open for the time. On the other hand, he knew exactly what he wanted out of a job: '*I don't know job-wise what I want to do, but all I know is that I want to have a nice house and buy my mum a house as well*', and to be '*financially comfortable'*. Reuben seemed embarrassed to admit that '*wealth [...] kind of motivates me*.' He was convinced that '*anyone can be rich and famous'*, all that was needed was '*working hard*' and '*effort'*. His uncle was a financial advisor, and Reuben actively sought his advice and felt close to him. This uncle also got Reuben a paid job the year before, to work for a colleague of his '*ordering, like house bills and client's bills and things like that.*' His roles models were '*music artists in America [...] because of their houses, their cars and their life.'*

Clearly, Reuben's main motivation at this time was becoming rich. Perhaps related to this, he had a more stoical interpretation of what constitutes a good job. While many other participants mentioned being passionate about their job, good relationships with colleagues and such, Reuben considered these of secondary importance, more of a bonus than a requirement. For him, a job or career was not the main aspiration, but tool to achieve his goal in life.

By the second interview, Reuben's future plans had solidified: this time he planned to stay at the hospital and get a job there job for a few years, but then go to university '*to climb up the ladder'*. Interestingly though, his long term plans did not align entirely with the short term ones. Reuben seemed to be in the process of adjusting his aspirations. He said he wanted to continue working at the hospital for a few years, then go to university and get a diploma in counselling, a subject unrelated to his apprenticeship. By the age of 30 though he wanted to become '*a successful counsellor'*. This time, Reuben also mentioned altruistic motivations: 'I like to help people that [...] need help' – he said.

Reuben seemed well supported at the apprenticeship, by his small family composed of his mother, uncle and grandmother, and many friends. His mother was his main source of support. She allowed him freedom to make his own choices, but had high expectations in term of '*going to work, working hard, working fast, coming home, doing chores'*. However, Reuben felt that he needed this pressure to stay motivated. On the other hand, Reuben felt his friends can be a hindrance to his achievement as they went out every day, apparently. Although they spent considerable time together, they never talked about their educational and occupational goals. '*We're kind of more focused on what's happening around us, what parties are going on, on Saturday night',* he explained.

I kept in contact with Reuben after the interviews. As he hoped, he was offered a job in the NHS and he enjoyed it very much.

Rosie

Rosie, a bubbly girl of Sri-Lankan Tamil origin, was nearly 18 years old when I first met her. She was attending a NEET employability programme offered by a council in West London (the same one as James) that she finished by the second interview.

Rosie left school with poor GCSE results, failing both English and Math. She then enrolled on several level 1 college courses: first she studied Health and Social Care, then Travel and Tourism, later engineering, but dropped out of them. She was not interested in pursuing the first; was stopped by the parents at the second; and being a small girl with delicate frame, fixing cars was physically too demanding for her. So, two years after her GCSEs, she hadn't achieved a level 2 qualification and, instead of continuing to level 2, she was still planning to retake the level 1 Travel and Tourism course that she had to leave earlier. At least she passed functional skills in English and Math in college.

In the meantime, Rosie also had several paid jobs: she worked in a McDonalds, as a shop assistant in a sports shop and as a receptionist at her cousin's garage, all over the city, travelling large distances to work. Before the NEET course, she also volunteered at a local YMCA, helping out with small children. She seemed to have a large network of friends and extended family; and she used family connections and friends with ease to secure jobs. Friendly and talkative, she made a new best friend at the course. She found the course and the council officers very helpful and supportive.

At the first interview, Rosie described enthusiastically her '*massive dream'* of becoming an air hostess. However, she did not have a plan on how to achieve this dream; her short term plans did not align with her stated aspirations. By the second interview, only a few months later, her future plans had changed again. This time she was waiting for response from the local council, where she applied for a level 2 apprenticeship to study business administration. Always resourceful, Rosie was also looking for other jobs in the meantime, but hoped she will get the apprenticeship as she was keen to study further and improve her qualifications: '*A job is just going working and that is it. I want to get something graduated instead of just work.'* In addition, she was already offered a job by a family friend who was ready to wait until she gets a response from the council: '*It is pretty good as well, it is a till manager, account manager. They are like "you are good at accounts aren't you, so you can come and work for us." I was like "yeah but I want to see if my first plan works."'* At the second interview, Rosie's long-term future plans were still fairly general, she did not seem to have an idea about the specific job she wanted to do*: 'I would love to work in a company that gives me good salary and… in a good department, as in like the working area*.' As she said, she wanted '*everyone's wish. Get money, get a new car, new house.'* Furthermore, she mentioned that she wanted to help children with cancer. Her strategy to achieve all these dreams was '*working hard and of course saving up money.'*

Although Rosie lived at home with her parents and was NEET at the time, she was expected to pay rent: *'they get a thousand and something pounds off me. So I was like "that's kind of too much for me, can't you take it down to 200 or 300?" They were like "okay, 400 [per month] is fine*"', she explained. Rosie also had to contribute to her two younger brothers' upbringing and provide '*pocket money and stuff*' for them. There were expectations from the extended family too: once a week, she had to look after her nephew in Luton, but at least she was paid £40 for that.

While Rosie came across as one of the chattiest participants, in fact, she revealed remarkably little about the difficulties she had to deal with. As mentioned earlier, she said her dream was becoming an air hostess. Therefore she started studying Travel and Tourism but '*got stopped [...] in the middle of the course*' by her parents. Although talking at length about the incident itself, she did not disclose much about the reasons, even after repeated prompts and probes. She only said it was due to '*family issues.'* Apparently, her extended family spread rumours about her: *'this whole Asian thing, like they wouldn't like other people to go like in a good place so they talk bad about them.'* Her parents called her a '*trouble-maker'* and '*were kind of like upset about me going to college so they were like "you have to stop going to college and*

you have to work.'' They took her to study engineering in an East London college and work at her cousin's garage there, having to travel across London to do so. Rosie still wanted to study Travel and Tourism, only gave up on this dream when she realised she needs to pay for education after turning 18. The course cost £100 per year and being NEET at the time she could not afford that.

Rosie said she had good relationship with her parents, especially at the second interview: '*Now it is very much better than before. Things are going on the right track.'* But it seemed to me the situation was more complex. Rosie said her mother '*is like a little child for me',* an odd way of describing a parent. '*She treats me like a friend, she is there for me',* she explained, although it was her mother specifically who stopped her studies. Rosie seemed to get on less well with her father, they never talked about education and her future. If having a problem, Rosie said she would first talk and get advice from a friend and some cousins, but not her parents.

Almost by accident, Rosie mentioned that she had epilepsy and was hospitalised before. It also turned out she was severely bullied in school and she was '*bunking classes'* mostly to avoid that. Although she reported this to her parents and teachers, all they said was to ignore it. Her school did not seem to nurture learning: *'in my year that school was very-very-VERY bad. I mean, the way that teachers were treating the students and then how the students were bringing illegal stuff in the school',* she said. But Rosie did not want to dwell much on these issues, she closed off my questions with saying: '*every kid gets bullied'* and '*that is the past now, I have to look into the future.'* She only let slip emotions when talking generally about the issues young people face nowadays: '*in London most kids are getting bullied. [...] I feel kind of bad saying this, but after they get bullied and when they get so depressed they feel like they want to commit suicide.'* But she claimed this does not affect her: '*No, I just got over it. I don't get bullied no more. It is just these young kids that don't know what they are doing*', she said emphatically.

I do not know what happened with Rosie after the interviews. She was the only participant who did not provide contact details or even her full name.

Conclusion

The aim of this descriptive chapter was to introduce the reader to the young people who took part in my study. By presenting their family background, experiences through the education system, their social support networks, dreams and plans for the future, I aimed to give then a

voice, and provide a sense of who they are. The analysis alone would not give justice to them and the complexities of their lives.

The next three chapters will present thematically the findings of the study, through the lens of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks described in Chapter 3. Importantly, the analysis presented in Chapters 6-8 will focus on issues directly related to participants' aspiration construction and implementation, so only some of the factors presented here will be picked up in later chapters.

CHAPTER 6. DEFINING ASPIRATIONS

Introduction: what do young people aspire to?

After introducing the participants in Chapter 5, the next three chapters will summarise the findings of the my research. *Chapter 6: Defining aspirations* discusses participants' future orientations as they were described during the first round of interviews. At this stage of the fieldwork, through the first interviews with participants, the study sought to examine the aspirations and career decision-making of young Londoners making their first move into further or higher education and/ or employment after completing compulsory full-time education. The longitudinal aspect of this study will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 6 starts with discussing aspirations in the light of current theoretical and policy debates. Then, the following sections introduce a typology of aspirations that I developed during this study. This typology emerged primarily from the empirical data, and it is based on young people's narratives about their aspirations.

As described earlier in Chapter 4, the 15 young people included in this study were identified and recruited based on their educational and employment situation at the time of the first round of interviews: some of them were doing their A levels, others attended FE colleges, three were completing apprenticeships, and a number of them were NEET - see Table 5 below.

Table 5. Participants' education and employment background at the time of the first interview

Education background, 1st interview	Participants	Date of 1st interview
A level students	Aisha, Darius, Flora, Mina	November 2014
Students in FE college, vocational studies	Ezra, Greg	April 2015
Apprentices	Hope, Maria, Reuben	Nov-Dec 2015
NEETs (recruited through survey in FE college)	Evie, Kurt	June 2015
NEETs (recruited from NEET programmes)	Adam, Hugh, James, Rosie	May 2016

Nonetheless, they were all identified as being at risk of educational underachievement, of leaving education with low or no qualifications. This put them at a high theoretical risk of difficult labour market transitions. Given their diverse backgrounds and wide range of perspectives, their stories, the rich narratives collected over the repeat interviews, allowed me

to explore the multitude of processes and mechanisms that have impacted on their attitudes and aspirations, and shaped their transition from school to work.

Given the diversity of participants' educational backgrounds – some still in school, others completing apprenticeships, still others being NEET after leaving education, the questions asked during the interviews were tailored to the interviewees' specific situation. Nonetheless, the broad topics covered during the first interviews were the same: they included previous school experiences and outcomes, future aspirations and plans, social support networks available, and anticipated challenges and strategies.

The primacy of educational and occupational aspirations

As discussed in *Chapter 3: Literature review*, the concept of 'aspirations' is not clearly defined neither in policy texts nor in the academic literature (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Hart, 2012). Instead, the term is used to cover a wide spectrum of orientations to the future, 'from dreams and fantasies to concrete ambitions and goals' (Gutman and Akerman, 2008:2). While it is a 'multifaceted' concept that can refer to 'a range of future desires from personal needs to collective duties' (Gutman and Akerman, 2008:3); traditionally, the focus has been on educational and occupational/ career aspirations, with much less focus on other areas of life.

My findings echoed the pervasiveness of interpreting aspirations in terms of educational and career goals. During the interviews, the initial questions asked were fairly generic, they did not focus specifically on future jobs; for example: *'Do you want to talk to me about your future plans?'; 'What do you want to do after finishing school/ this apprenticeship/ this course?'; 'What are your plans for the future?'* Later in the interview, I also asked: '*If you imagine yourself in five/ ten years' time, what do you want to see happening in your life?'* Interestingly though, many participants interpreted this general enquiry as a question about their educational and occupational aspirations only, and replied elaborating specifically on these. This was particularly obvious among participants who were still in school doing A levels at the time of the interviews: Aisha, Darius, Flora and Mina. For instance, Flora, the Hungarian girl, started the interview with the statement: *'I would like to go to university, to study film and get a degree […] and would like to get a career related to films.'* Aisha, who moved to the UK from Nigeria, replied in a similar fashion: '*I want to study law at university*.' All four of them planned to continue their studies at university: Darius wanted to study medicine and become a doctor, while Mina was interested in Law and Political Economics. These participants tended to reply

confidently and fluently, without any hesitation, not needing time to contemplate the question, as in their answer was 'ready', fully formulated already.

The similarity of the answers provided by the A level students - in terms of grammatical structure and the self-assured delivery - gave the impression that these young people had 'practice' answering similar questions, likely in school, perhaps during career guidance sessions, preparing for their GCSEs, choosing subjects for A levels and planning for university. Since the next step in their lives was going to university and they have already started to prepare for that at the time of the interviews, it made sense that these young people focused on their plans for higher education.

While the reduction of 'aspirations' to 'educational/ occupational aspirations' was the most evident in the case of participants who were still in school, in fact it was common among all participants. For example, Maria, who was completing a childcare apprenticeship, described her future plans as: '*for the future, I really want to work like a practitioner, either in a nursery, or even like a babysitter, something to do with children. That's why I chose to do apprenticeship.'* Hugh, a young man who did not seem to have concrete career goals, still mentioned '*a nice,* a *well-paid job'* as his future aspiration. Table 6 below summarises the educational and occupational aspirations participants mentioned during the first interview.

Table 6. Young people's aspirations

Name	Educational aspirations	Occupational Aspirations
Adam	FE college - Horticulture	Working outdoors/ Horticulture
Aisha	University - Law	Lawyer
Darius	University - Medicine	Doctor
Evie	FE college - Level 3 Child Care	Nursery Assistant
Ezra	No further plans	Actor or Shop Assistant in anime shop
Flora	University - Media	Media industry – Editor/ Teacher
Greg	FE college Level 3 IT + Apprenticeship	System/ Server Administrator
Hope	Higher Apprenticeship	Business Administration
Hugh	Unsure: FE College/ Apprenticeship	Any job
James	Unsure: FE College/Apprenticeship/ University	Fitness instructor or IT/ any job
Kurt	University - Nursing	Paediatric Nurse
Maria	No further plans	Childcare, Teaching Assistant

Mina	University - Law, Political Economics	Unsure (perhaps lawyer, financial analyst)
Reuben	Unsure, university later on	Unsure
Rosie	Unsure: FE College/Apprenticeship/ University	Flight Assistant or any job

Nonetheless, participants mentioned other types of aspirations too, not just educational and career goals. For instance, Flora also listed having her own apartment and a family among her aspirations; and Ezra dreamed about travelling to Japan, the land of anime. Hope focused on her social and spiritual aspirations, talking at length about the importance of spending time with family and friends. Others wanted to have a comfortable life. Mina, for example, explained: '*I have a lot of shaped imagination of what it could be like to have your own house, your own car, you know, living a good life, have a good job, that's basically what I want to do.*' Hugh expressed his aspirations of a 'good life' rather succinctly: '*Just a nice, a well-paid job. Just (to) be able to live happy, peaceful.*' Others, like Reuben, seemed more focused on one aspect of their future life: '*I want to be financially comfortable'*, he said. Responses varied in terms of what specific aspirations were mentioned – for example, some participants listed having a family among their future aspirations (for example Flora, Hugh and Mina); some wanted to travel later in their lives (Darius, Ezra, Greg and Hope for instance); others mentioned financial security, happiness and/ or comfort.

Then again, some of the 'other' types of aspirations participants mentioned were still related to their occupational ambitions. For example, Darius, who wanted to become a doctor, planned to take a gap year in Sri Lanka, where his family came from originally. He wanted to work in a hospital there, to gain valuable work experience in a medical environment that might help him getting a place at a medical school later on: *'I would like to pass my A levels first then… go on a gap year and then… go abroad, do some work experience and then apply to uni for medicine.'*

To sum it up, the majority of participants tended to interpret the concept of 'aspirations' in terms of education and employment, in line with the established understanding of the term both in policy-making and research. Other research studies on young people's aspirations conducted in the UK lately (Baker, 2014; Abrahams, 2016) had similar findings. Participants were likely exposed to the 'aspiration discourse', given its popularity at the time of the interviews, with politicians instructing schools and the general public to 'raise aspirations' (as discussed in Chapter 2), which then shaped their understanding of the concept.

It is worth mentioning though that many of my interviews were conducted in schools, colleges and apprenticeship training places. These settings might have further suggested – perhaps subconsciously – to participants that I am primarily interested in their educational and occupational objectives. What is more, all participants were explained about the larger research project which was clearly education-focused. These contextual factors might have also influenced participants' assumptions on what I was interested in. This idea is explored further in the next section.

Presenting aspirational identities

Hart (2012) distinguishes between 'revealed' and 'concealed' aspirations, where the former refers to those aspirations that young people share with others, that they display when prompted; while their full set of aspirations might stay concealed. My study – as most studies, by definition – explored revealed aspirations. Importantly, however, we ought to take into account that these aspirations are not only the products of young people's innermost desires, expectations and negotiations of opportunities and risk. In addition, revealed aspirations might also be shaped by what young people think is expected of them, according to '*the performative demands of the situation*' (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011:514) and their attempts to control and manage impressions others form of them (Goffman, 1959). Given the ideological importance of 'high aspirations', it is likely that young people are expected to display such ambitions in school, and perhaps at home too. Goffman notes that 'presentations of the self' involve idealisation and attempts at displaying characteristics valued in society:

> *'When the individual presents himself before others his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole.'* (Goffman, 1959:35)

As the 'ideal student' is expected to be 'aspirational', showing high aspirations becomes normative. In this climate, young people might feel compelled to present a highly aspirational version of themselves, as

> *'they have learned the lesson that acceptable ambitions, whatever the individual's class or educational background, are all to do with the prophylactic aspiration to professionality. This may strongly influence what people say when they are asked what they want to be.'* (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011:514)

This mechanisms – the '*performative function of aspirations'* (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011) - might have been even stronger during my interviews, where participants were specifically quizzed about their aspirations, by a researcher from a university, as part of a research project focusing on education.

The majority of participants mentioned university studies among their aspirations, even those who seemed to have little realistic chance of attending, due to their lack of qualifications; for instance James and Rosie. Only a few participants - Ezra, Hope and Maria - ruled out tertiary education. Ezra did not believe that a degree is necessary for becoming and actor; while Maria felt that her financial situation does not allow her further studies. Hope and Maria enrolled on apprenticeships deliberately, as an alternative to university because both felt that the academic path does not provide good enough returns in terms of career prospects to the investment required. Adam and Hugh did not mention university aspirations; leaving school without achieving minimum GCSE qualifications had likely affected their narratives about their future plans. The rest of participants indicated that they are considering going to university; however, not all had clear plans on how and when to do so. Even those who were enrolled on or aiming for vocational studies – including Evie, Greg and Reuben – hoped to go to university eventually, at a later point in time.

So my findings are largely in line with the academic literature in this field, showing that most young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds have generally high aspirations (Finlay et al., 2010; Sinclair, Kendrick and Scott 2010; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; Rose and Baird, 2013; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Baker et al., 2014), and the majority consider tertiary education (Berrington et al., 2016). On the one hand, this is attributable to the pervasiveness and success of the 'raising aspiration' discourse and initiatives (Baker, 2014), as discussed in the previous section. I also argue that these research findings need to be interpreted in terms of 'presentation of the self', young people's engagement in impression management (Goffman, 1959) in educational and research settings.

Expectations, aspirations and dreams

The previous section suggested that high educational aspirations might be shaped by young people's attempts at impression management, their desire to present 'aspirational identities'. In this section, I further explore issues related to interpreting aspirations which are presented in a research context.

It was explained in Chapter 3 that the term 'aspirations' is not clearly defined in education and youth research, therefore the concept is often used with different meanings, denoting various notions belonging to the semantic field of orientations to the future: hopes, desires, dreams, expectations, and so on (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Some of the aspiration literature differentiates between 'aspirations' and 'expectations' (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; St Clair et al, 2013; Khattab, 2015; Berrington et al. 2016). In this framework, aspirations refer to ideal or dream occupations, while expectations refer to realistic assessments of job opportunities.

During the interviews, I asked several questions to probe these concepts. For example, the general '*what would you like to do after finishing this course*' question was followed by questions about short and long term goals (2, 5, 10 years' time; '*by the time you are 30 years old*'); as well as asking about their ideal job: '*if you could do whatever you wanted, what kind of job would you like to do?*' I also asked participants to assess the likelihood of achieving these aspirations.

Interestingly, many participants did not differentiate between aspirations and expectations, or ideal and realistic aspirations. This might be related to their age and specific stage in life: they had just made significant educational and career decisions at the time of finishing compulsory full-time education. Instead of presenting their dream jobs as younger participants might do, these young Londoners, 16 and above, showed more affinity for realistic job expectations. When specifically asked about their 'ideal job', or 'where they would like to see themselves in an ideal situation', they tended to mention the same occupations as before, only at a higher level, for example Adam said: *'I'd like to own my own business, my own horticulture gardening business.'*

The majority of participants were able to articulate their occupational aspirations. Several of them described one specific job, as shown in Table 6. There were some exceptions though, young people who did differentiate between their dream job and realistic, potential occupation: Ezra, James and Rosie. Ezra dreamed about becoming an actor while admitting that he would take work as a shop assistant, if necessary; and James wanted to become a personal trainer while applying to any jobs and apprenticeships he could find. When asked about her aspirations, Rosie replied with using the phrase 'massive dream': *'I've got this massive dream, like, it's always been my childhood dream that I want to work in like as an air host, like in British Airways or like Qantas or somewhere like that.'* Although she listed several jobs that she had

tried in the past and occupations that she considered possible for the near future, Rosie kept using the word 'dream' whenever she referred to her aspiration of becoming a flight assistant: '*And after that I want to go for my, like, my whole dream is like, it's a long way to go for that. […] I don't know, for some people their dream actually don't, like, happen but I really want to make this happen.'*

Significantly, both James and Rosie were NEET, at the time of the first interview, and Ezra, as I found out at the second interview, became NEET shortly after I met him. It seemed that participants who were NEET - or just about to become one - had a greater propensity to distinguish between realistic jobs and dream careers than the rest. While they did not explain the reason for this, it is possible that for these young people the distance between potential/ realistic jobs and occupations which are in any way 'desirable' was larger than for others. These three youngsters – Ezra, James and Rosie, all lacked any qualifications, and only Rosie had a record of work experience/ employment. Likely they were well aware of their bleak job prospects: both Ezra and Rosie explained that they would take any job available, while James explicitly said that he was applying for jobs he was not interested in: '*I applied for apprenticeships and traineeships even which I didn't really want to do but I would do it for the experience and that.*'

The split between 'expectations' and 'dream occupations' in their case might signal an attempt to retain and present an 'aspirational' identity', as discussed in the previous section; while understanding the difficulties they face in obtaining any job, let alone an 'aspirational' one. For instance, Rosie repeatedly emphasized the challenges to realising her 'massive dream':

> '*It's a long way to go for that'; 'for some people their dream actually don't, like, happen'; 'I still get discouraged by everyone, like around my family saying that you can't, like, even if you go college, I don't think you're going to learn anything, you're going to fail it. I want to show them that I can do this, I can come to a level and I could, like, actually get this job and everything, that's like my aim, I want to, like, yeah!'*

It is also telling that neither of them mentioned any plans of actually working towards their 'ideal aspirations'. Although stressing their commitment, Ezra, James and Rosie depicted their 'dream careers' as disconnected from their daily reality as actual dreams.

Importantly, it needs to be mentioned that not all NEETs in my sample talked about 'dream jobs'. For example, Hugh did not describe any type of career aspirations, while Adam, Evie

and Kurt did not distinguish between realistic and idealistic careers. Instead, they outlined a plan, a strategy to achieve their stated aspirations: working in horticulture or construction for Adam; becoming a nursery practitioner for Evie, and a paediatric nurse for Kurt.

While all these young people were NEET, there was a significant difference between them: while Ezra, Hugh, James and Rosie dropped out of education with no qualifications; Adam, Evie and Kurt had completed level 2 vocational courses prior to becoming NEET. Accordingly, Evie was volunteering in her profession and looking for a job in a nursery; and Kurt was preparing to study further in the same field. While Adam had a level 2 degree in Professional Cookery, he only completed it as because other courses were not available for him at the time, so he was planning to re-train in horticulture or construction. Based on these interviews, having some qualifications seemed to be a protective factor with regards to future planning. This makes sense, since those lacking qualifications do not have the 'entry ticket' to the job market and further studies. Even for Adam, who did not intend to use his qualification, having basic qualifications correlated with more strategic future planning.

Thus it seems that among the 15 participants, only NEETs with no qualifications distinguished between 'ideal career aspirations' and 'expectations'. One explanation, as outlined earlier, could be that these young people were the furthest away from the labour market. For them, even getting low status, low paid jobs was difficult, as they explained. Differentiating between 'aspirations'/ 'career dreams' and 'expectations' might be an attempt to uphold and present an 'aspirational identity', as explored in the previous section. Their lack of career planning might have reflected the understanding that for them, getting a job was not an issue of choice: with their existing credentials they would need to take any job available.

It also needs to be acknowledged that in an interview setting 'meaning' is co-created by the interviewer and participant. As such, what I, as a researcher, labelled as a 'dream job' or 'idealistic aspiration' – which, consequently, is not a 'realistic expectation' - is influenced by extrinsic factors too, such as my own value judgements, contextual factors, the findings from the second interview and later contact with participants. For example, at the first interview, Kurt explained that he wanted to become a paediatric nurse. At the time, Kurt was NEET, a college dropout, struggling with depression, cerebral palsy and a list of other health conditions. Realistically, any of these issues could have been considered sufficient reason to hinder his career aspiration, and place his goal of becoming a paediatric nurse into the realm of unobtainable ideals. Nonetheless, when writing up the findings, I interpreted Kurt's aspirations

as ‘realistic’. Reflecting on my interpretation, it seems that I based this judgement on his previous achievement of a level 2 qualification, his evidently strong motivation, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that he was admitted to university by the second interview. On the other hand, I categorised James’ aspiration of becoming a fitness instructor and Rosie’s ‘massive dream’ to be a flight attendant as ‘idealistic aspirations’, therefore, ‘unrealistic’. First, neither of them seemed to have a plausible plan to achieve these career goals; second, they were still both NEET by the repeat interview; third, their aspirations and future plans had changed again in the intervening period. Perhaps if I interviewed them again in one or two years’ time, and they were working toward achieving these aspirations, I would have re-considered these as ‘realistic aspirations’, given the new context.

Clearly, what is interpreted as idealistic or realistic aspiration can be highly subjective, based on the researcher’s value judgements, as well as contextual factors; unless the distinction is made by the participants themselves, as in Rosie’s case. While in the academic literature on aspirations it is commonly acknowledged that ‘aspirations’ are ill defined because participants can interpret the term on a spectrum from unattainable dreams and hopes to realistic prospects (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Hart, 2012), there is less recognition of researchers’ bias, that researchers themselves contribute to the subjective dimension of aspirations.

‘Poverty of aspirations’ or ‘atmospheric expectations’?

As explained in the Introduction, one of my motivations for conducting this study was the discrepancy between the portrayals of youth and their aspirations by different stakeholders. Policy-makers tend to blame young people – especially those from disadvantaged background – for their ‘poverty of aspirations’: not aiming high enough and thus failing to attain good qualifications, and as a result, ending up unemployed or in low-quality, precarious employment (Spohrer, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2013; Baker et al. 2014; Berrington et al 2016). On the other hand, in mass media, youth are often portrayed as having extremely high, unrealistic aspirations; with the majority yearning to become highly paid footballers, pop and reality-tv stars and YouTube personalities. ‘Millennials’ – as the generation born between 1980 and the early 2000s is frequently referred to - are described as lazy, entitled narcissists with ‘*atmospheric expectations*’, according to the much talked about Time magazine article, Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation (Stein, 2013). Other articles note how ‘*millennials’ aspirations have shifted towards money, fame and image*’, as declared

in an article entitled '*Millennials will go to extreme lengths for celebrity fame including disowning their family'* (Young, 2017).

Contrary to these portrayals, the occupational aspirations of the 15 participants seemed much more conventional. Despite their diverse backgrounds described earlier in the Methodology chapter, most young people in this study described charmingly ordinary future ambitions. They were aspiring to become doctors and business administrators, nursery practitioners and flight attendants, and not footballers, celebrities and YouTube stars as one might expect based on media representations of today's youth. If anything, participants in this study seemed to aspire disproportionately to traditional occupations, such as teaching, nursing, childcare and so on (see Table 6), which might indicate a somewhat limited understanding of the options available in the contemporary London labour market.

However, none of the participating young people described outrageously unobtainable goals. Even occupations which were interpreted as 'idealistic aspirations', were in fact fairly common, 'normal' vocations: personal trainer and flight assistant. While acting can be more difficult to achieve, and for Ezra, it was deemed likely unattainable, the acting profession per se is not necessarily out of reach for young people, especially in the London context.

Not all participants had clearly defined occupational aspirations and well thought-through strategic plans leading to them. However, the 'aspiration narratives' presented during the interviews revealed that the majority of young people weighed their chances realistically. These 'aspiration narratives' - that identify the educational and occupational aspirations as end goals and describe the implementation strategies leading to them – are presented and explored more systematically in the following section.

A typology of aspirations

As it has been mentioned several times, despite the wealth of academic attention, the concept of aspirations seems to evade attempts to define and theorise it. In this section I propose a typology of aspirations which can aid our theoretical understanding of the concept. In addition, it might be useful in practice too, for instance in career education, advice and guidance.

As such, this section describes participants' educational and occupational aspirations and the plans they had made to achieve them in more detail, arranged into four aspiration types that emerged from participants' narratives. Before that, however, I describe the process of developing this aspiration typology.

Developing a typology of aspirations

Reflecting on the process of trying to distinguish between participants' ideal and realistic aspirations, I realised that young people's aspirations – commonly interpreted as objectives, end goals – need to be interpreted holistically, in the context of plans, implementation strategies that they constructed to achieve their ambitions. After all, the plausibility of an aspiration end goal depends to a large extent on the strength of the strategic plan leading to it. While it is relatively easy to measure aspirations as end goals through a survey, for example; collecting and analysing data on aspiration planning is more challenging, due to the inherently storied nature of plans. The latter presupposes more substantial engagement with young people's aspiration narratives, both for theory- and practice-oriented reasons. Importantly, these narratives contain not only a number of relevant distinctly identifiable factors, including qualification levels, awareness of available options and resources, to name a few (that can be measured through a questionnaire), but also more intangible yet crucially important ones, for example, the emotional commitment young people displayed during the interview. However, this can be discerned more from the way how they described their aspirations and future plans, which would be very difficult to measure with a questionnaire.

The interviews with young people convinced me that aspirations need to be approached holistically, both in theory and practice. The distinction between idealistic and realistic aspirations, applied to my data, seemed rather simplistic conceptually and of limited use from a practical point of view (for career advice and guidance, for instance). Both in research and practice, engaging in conversations with young people regarding their aspirations might provide more suitable material to work with. While the term 'aspiration' is commonly understood simply as an objective, an end goal, my data suggested that approaching it from a procedural perspective, as a complex interplay between the end goal and the strategy leading to it, promised fruitful avenues for theorising the concept.

My first attempt at an aspiration typology was constructed as a means to summarise succinctly, clearly and accurately the aspirations of 24 young people who took part in longitudinal interviews conducted for the RESL.eu project[37]. The RESL.eu reporting template requested a comparison between the aspirations[38] of different groups of participants, including the three a

[37] In the UK, 26 young people were interviewed twice, although the project design prescribed only 24: 8 young people who at the time of the first interview were still in mainstream education, 8 attending extra-muros and 8 NEET. Some of these 24 young people were also included in my doctoral study.

[38] 'Aspirations' was only one of the several broad themes explored in the relevant report, see Van Caudenberg et al., 2017.

priori participant categories (young people in mainstream education, in alternative learning programmes and those who are NEET), but also ethnic, social class and other relevant groups – all in half to one page.

Already at this stage I recognised that a meaningful typology of aspirations needs to address young people's implementation strategies too, not only the end goal of their aspirations. As such, the first version included four types: (1) academic pathway plan; (2) vocational pathway plan; (3) creative pathway plan; and (4) flexible/ undecided pathway plan, where (1) represented plans where young people intended to achieve their career aspirations through investing into academic courses; (2) focusing on vocational training; (3) pursuing creative or artistic interests; and (4) referred to undecided aspirations and/ or incoherent implementation strategies. This typology, while helped me present the data for the purpose of the report, did not seem to provide new theoretical insights. It was also problematic to apply, as there were overlaps between the categories, most notably because 'undecided pathways' appeared in all the other three categories. Thus, the first typology further convinced me of the importance of focusing on aspiration planning, both in terms of education and careers. I also realised that I need to incorporate into the typology how concrete or coherent these plans were. As such, the second typology was structured alongside the following matrix:

Table 7. Preliminary aspiration typology

1 ASPIRATION PLAN - decided ASPIRATION END GOAL - decided	2 ASPIRATION PLAN - decided ASPIRATION END GOAL - undecided
3 ASPIRATION PLAN - undecided ASPIRATION END GOAL - decided	4 ASPIRATION PLAN - undecided ASPIRATION END GOAL - undecided

Populating the abstract classification system with actual examples from the data demonstrated that indeed, the typology provided an appropriate framework to categorise the data and also allowed for theoretical insights, as it will be discussed in subsequent sections. Then, based on the data and the theoretical literature, the typology was further refined. The first two categories were labelled as 'linear aspirations' and 'open aspirations', respectively, to reflect the specific aspiration pathways. While the 3rd and 4th categories seems to be different in abstract terms, based on my data, they seemed to overlap. Young people who had a concrete, defined educational and/ or occupational goal, tended to also have some knowledge on how to achieve that. Those who were not able to present a (more or less) plausible plan, all listed a number of unrelated occupations as aspirations (some idealistic, others more realistic prospects) while

also admitting that in fact, they would accept any job – the criteria for the 4th category. Therefore, illuminated by the data, there were no substantial differences between them. Therefore the 3rd and 4th categories were combined into one, called 'tentative aspirations', because the corresponding narratives, in fact, seemed very similar.

This typology rests on the underlying assumption that young people have accepted and internalised the importance of having (high) educational and occupational aspirations, and they actively engage with career planning. My reading of the literature on neoliberal subjectivities and governmentality (Berlant, 2011; Mendick et al., 2015; Tokumitsu, 2015; 2015) has led me to question these assumptions. As a result, I added another category, 'alternative aspirations', to capture the aspirations of those young people who prioritise different types of aspirations over career goals, for example, creating art and music, having a family and/ or children, and so on. The next section presents the four aspiration types and describes participants' educational and occupational aspirations through this framework.

Types of aspirations

As explained earlier, this typology emerged from the data through an inductive, iterative process of data analysis, and it is based on young people's aspiration narratives. The interviews with participants convinced me that aspirations need a holistic approach, taking into account the multitude of often interconnected factors that shape young people's educational and occupational objectives.

This section describes participants' educational and occupational aspirations and the plans they made to achieve them in more detail, arranged into four aspiration types that emerged from the participants' narratives. This classification takes into account not only the aspiration 'end points' - the education and training courses, qualifications and jobs or professions mentioned by young people, but their whole narratives on aspirations, including the strategies they intended to use and, to some extent, the subjective values attached to their aspirations. Based on this, four types of educational/ occupational aspirations have been identified: linear, open, tentative and alternative aspirations. The typology presented below takes into account both components of the concept of aspirations, and presents an original contribution to the literature.

- *Linear aspirations* are aspiration narratives where young people described a clearly identified profession or occupation, as well as an informed strategy on how to achieve that, including educational choices, work experience needed, and so on. These aspiration

strategies were described in a linear fashion, as one step leading to the next one, according to a pre-established plan. Some of them mentioned back-up plans as well.

- *Open aspirations* – in these narratives, the focus seemed to be on the immediate future, in these cases, the specific course young people wanted to study, while leaving their occupational choices open.
- *Tentative aspirations* – these narratives mentioned several alternative occupational goals. However, unlike the back-up options mentioned at linear aspirations, these alternative options were in unrelated fields, requiring different strategies to achieve them. The young people who had tentative aspirations often were not able to describe a credible, convincing strategy of how to achieve them.
- *Alternative aspirations* – some young people did not consider occupational goals as their defining aspirations. Instead, they emphasized their intension to prioritise other aspects of life in their quest for meaning.

This classification is exploratory in nature, given the limited amount of data it is based on. Instead of providing a comprehensive typology of young people's future orientations, it intends to add to existing understandings and scholarship on aspirations.

Linear career aspirations

This category describes aspirations formulated in the vein of the 'ideal type' that is implied by policy and popular discourses, according to which young people identify an occupation/ profession/ qualification they are aiming for, then outline a strategic plan on how to achieve that.

In my study, several young people presented their aspirations in similar fashion. As described at the beginning of this chapter, participants who were enrolled on A-level studies during the first interview – including Aisha, Darius and Flora, tended to describe their aspirations in terms of education and employment. These young people had clear ideas on the job/ profession they were aiming for: Aisha wanted to become a lawyer, Darius a doctor and Flora was drawn to the media industry, wanting to be an editor. They were also able to clearly describe the course and/or university they wanted to attend. Moreover, all three seemed to interpret higher education from a purely pragmatic perspective: attending university for them was a strategic goal-oriented step taken in order to get them closer to their desired career/ occupation. Strikingly, as discussed earlier, they even narrated their aspirations using a common syntax: 'I would like to study <specific course> because I want to be a <specific occupation>.' For

example, Flora said: *'I would like to go to university, to study film and get a degree. (...) And would like to get a career related to films.*'

Arguably, these young people presented themselves as the embodiments of the ideal-type youth postulated in the education and youth policy discourse, in terms of their aspirations: they seemed to have made 'intelligent choices' based on well-researched information, and the educational route leading to that. Indeed, the educational strategies they presented seemed solid, well-researched and strategic. In addition, they made plans for further extracurricular activities, to enhance their chances of securing a place at their chosen university course. For instance, Darius planned to take a gap year in Sri Lanka, where his family came from originally, and gain work experience working in a hospital there: '*going abroad and doing work experience in a health care environment [...] doing that, will give me like a broader perspective of medicine.'* Flora, too, was planning to submit an application for a three-week work experience at a major media company.

Not only A level students described the pathway to achieve their aspiration in a linear form. Several participants who attended vocational courses - in further education and apprenticeships – had also presented clear occupational goals and instrumental education or training strategies leading to them. For example, Greg explained:

> *'I've looked into everything. I've made sure that before I've decided what I'm going to do in the future I need to make sure that I can do it, you know, and that I know where to go and what to do*.'

He planned to become a system administrator, therefore he was studying ICT (Information and Computer Technology) at college and aimed at achieving a Level 3 diploma. Greg was aware that he also needed a degree but did not think that he can afford going to university. Instead he planned to complete a higher apprenticeship in IT.

Evie and Kurt were both NEET at the time of the first interview. Evie achieved Level 2 in Childcare, while Kurt dropped out of his Level 3 Health and Social Care course. Nonetheless, both presented clear goals and strategies when I met them. Kurt's ambition was to become a paediatric nurse and he planned to complete an access course to nursing, so he could progress to university after. Evie wanted to work with children as a nursery assistant, so she had been volunteering in two nurseries while applying for jobs. Maria also aimed for a nursery assistant job and she was completing a Childcare apprenticeship hoping that it will lead to a good job.

She had further aspirations too: to become a teaching assistant later on, through acquiring more experience in the field.

Some participants mentioned fall-back options, 'contingency' occupations in case their main aspirations did not came true. For instance, Flora explained that, in addition to editing, teaching also appealed to her: *I'm interested in becoming a teacher too… If I won't succeed with editing*.' Evie and Maria both considered nannying and babysitting, respectively, as further options in addition to working in a nursery. Maria also mentioned opening her own nursery, not as career progression, but as another option if her plans do not work out: '*a babysitter, or even opening my own nursery, which I think will be very... I mean, not easy; it will be demanding.* (…) *I'm thinking about it, but it's not something that I really want to do.*' Similarly, Greg had a plan B too: *'I have a backup plan (...), if that [becoming a system/ server administrator] doesn't go well, I have an IT technician, which is what I'd like to do as well, so I have a couple of options to do*' – he explained.

Actually, Greg wanted to become an IT technician initially, and learnt about system administration while researching the previous option:

> *'my first choice was to become an IT technician. But as I looked into other jobs that were related to technician, I saw that there was a server administrator. I started looking into it more and it seems like something that I would be good at in the future.'*

This quote highlights the fluidity of young people's aspirations: in their search for the optimal choice, they often change or amend their aspirations. Perhaps if I interviewed him a few months earlier, he would have presented a different future plan.

Most young people in my sample had clear ideas about the jobs they were aiming for and the educational pathway leading to that. The aspiration narratives of the remaining participants – while showing some similarities with this group – also differed in significant ways, as it will be discussed in the next sections.

Open career aspirations

Not all participants seemed committed to a specific job; instead, some young people talked about focusing on their immediate studies. While they delineated the industry or general field they were interested in, they preferred leaving their career options open for the time being. Mina, for example, said:

‘*After I finish school, I probably want to go to university. And I either want to study International Law or Political Economics because that’s what I’m really interested in, I like these subjects. I’m doing Law and Politics right now.*’

Her lack of a clear, exact job aspiration however concealed well thought-through future planning. Mina was focusing on achieving good grades, to improve her chances of getting into a good university. The year before the interview, her academic attainment was low and she was identified as being at risk of ESL by the RESL.eu survey. However, by the time of the first interview, she changed schools and decided to retake one year, to improve her grades. She researched universities in London and was entertaining alternative potential career aspirations:

‘*There’s a couple of thing in mind, there’s either you become an analyst in a bank, but you can become a teacher or there’s a lot of ideas really, but I still haven’t thought of any yet.* […] *I’m still thinking about, I’m still trying to see what’s.’*

She seemed convinced that studying Politics and Law is a solid foundation for a good career: *‘they will actually give you a good job in the future. You will achieve good money and it would just be a good job and that’s what I really like doing’,* Mina explained.

Reuben and Adam also seemed to concentrate on the immediate future and their studies, while leaving their career options open. Reuben, who had just embarked on an Assistant Clinical Technologist Apprenticeship on his mother’s advice, admitted that his career plans were undecided for the time:

‘*No, I have no idea what I want to be. It’s too soon. […] your mind changes every few months, so you don’t really know what you want to be at this age. I’m not sure career-wise what I want to be long-term.*’

Nonetheless, Reuben seemed committed to completing his apprenticeship and content with progressing into an occupation that his apprenticeship prepared him for: ‘*I would like to be a technician from my current placement, at the moment, or if not a technician, then I would like to work in the equipment library, which was my last placement.*’ Reuben also planned to improve his career opportunities by going to a higher apprenticeship or university at some later point in his life: *‘I want to step up the ladder a bit more. […] I need to have lots of experience and a few degrees.’* While he was unable or unwilling to formulate concrete future plans, he had clear plans for the next one and a half years: to finish the apprenticeship he had started, then, if he still likes it, start working in this profession.

When asked about his aspirations, Adam said that he would like to work '*anything outdoors really'*. Then he went into more details: *'Ideally, I want to go to college in September to study landscape and horticulture, that sort of sector.'* Although Adam did not present an exact job aspiration for the longer term either, he seemed decided regarding the steps to take in the immediate future. He had looked up which nearby colleges provided courses in horticulture and made plans for the next academic year. With further probing, it became clear that he, in fact, had more defined occupational aspirations, and his long-term goal was to have his own horticulture/ gardening business. However, at the time of the interview, he seemed to prefer leaving his long-term options open. Given his background – growing up in care and having a criminal conviction – this caution seemed well justified. It is well documented that young people leaving care and those with criminal convictions have a much-reduced likelihood of getting a job (Pager, 2003; Osgood et al., 2005; Bushway et al., 2011; Verbruggen, 2016). Adam was well aware of these disadvantages and his fall-back option was to take any job: '*Just to work with a company that is a decent company that doesn't try and put you in danger'*, he said tellingly.

Tentative career aspirations

Some participants seemed to struggle with presenting a coherent aspiration narrative. Ezra, Hugh, James and Rosie named several different educational and occupational goals which would have required different strategies to achieve. Moreover, they were not able to articulate plausible plans to achieve these ambitions, their strategies were not congruent with their stated aspirations.

Ezra wanted to become an actor, James was interested in sports, and Rosie's dream was to become a flight assistant. Considering these aspirations difficult to achieve, they listed fall-back options too. Ezra mentioned working as a shop assistant, ideally selling anime-related merchandise: '*well if I can't do drama, I don't know, I wouldn't mind having like a normal job as long as I enjoy it, like say, if I work there's this place (...) called Tokyo toys.'* He admitted though that in fact he would take any job: '*it's just, basically, find a work in a shoe shop, I'll be happy.'* James seemed to have a plan-B too. Although he wanted to become a personal trainer, he considered *'just anything to do with computers',* as a back-up option. Previously, he applied to various jobs and apprenticeships, such as: *'IT, like marketing, resources and also like programming, and just like reception jobs as well that use computers.*' Rosie, whose dream was becoming a flight assistant, also mentioned a few other occupations she could potentially do: *'I want to work for a while [...] something to do with customer caring [...] What kind of*

work? ... Like administering…' Just like Ezra, Rosie also explained that she would accept any job: '*I want to like, actually, I wouldn't mind like, I wouldn't mind any jobs, I just want to work and then earn my money and then, yeah.'*

Although Flora, Evie, Maria and Greg – who presented linear aspirations – all mentioned several occupations, as shown earlier, their back-up options were in the same fields as their first choices: media, childcare and IT, respectively. Therefore these occupations did not need different strategies to achieve. Ezra, James and Rosie on the other hand listed unrelated occupations. While it is not inconceivable to prepare for different types of occupations at the same time – for example acting and looking for a retail job, as in Ezra's case, these would need different strategies in terms of education, work experience and job search, likely making the process more complex and difficult.

Furthermore, Flora, Evie, Maria and Greg were already studying/ training for their chosen occupations[39]. In contrast, neither Ezra, nor James, nor Rosie had achieved any relevant qualifications. At the time of the first interview, Ezra was enrolled on an unrelated FE course (Science, Level 1), while James and Rosie were NEET, with no clear plan on how to improve their chances of getting a job in either occupation they mentioned. Both James and Rosie dropped out of relevant college courses they were doing - Sports and Travel and Tourism, respectively. James' training to become a personal trainer only included working out. Regarding computing, he seemed to rely on his 'natural' ability: '*I've got like a natural thing for it',* but he did not have any IT-related qualifications. He described his aspirations and future plans as follows:

> *'I'm actually really passionate about sports, but not just any sports, I want to be a personal trainer, that's why I started the level one sports course.[…] I was disappointed I didn't get to finish it because it would've been that one step nearer to where I want to be, like finally. […] Well, at the moment I exercise every day and I know that keeping up a level of fitness is like a big part of it… Yeah, I'd like to… sort of go out and get clients, and I think it's what I want to do is called freelancing personal training and yeah I think I would actually go to uni first though if I could, that's what I'd want to do, that's the way I'd want to get there.'*

[39] Flora chose media for A levels and planned to study it at university too; Evie completed level 1 and 2 childcare courses at an FE college; Maria was a childcare apprentice; and Greg studied IT at college.

Rosie's plans were similarly inconsistent. She, too, left school without achieving minimum qualifications (5 A*-C GCSEs), then subsequently enrolled and dropped out of several college courses: Health and Social Care, Travel and Tourism, Engineering. Nonetheless, she intended to go to university next: *'After I finish the course [provided by the local authority for NEETs] I want to go into uni.'* She was aware that she needs better qualifications for that – *'you need to get A's and B's in your English and maths'*. Answering my repeated prompts, she described the 'steps' leading to university:

Magda: *What do you want to study at uni?*

Rosie: *I want to get more experience in travel and tourism. […]*

Magda: *Now if you need A's and B's in maths and English and all kind of levels, what's your plan? How do you get them?*

Rosie: *Um… I will go for the step by step, I'll go like, if you want.*

Magda: *Yes, please tell me what are these steps.*

Rosie: *These steps were: first I want to, like, work my butt off for maths and English, I mean English is fine but my maths is just totally not fine…*

Magda: *So do you have to go to college or somewhere to do these exams?*

Rosie: *Nowadays they're doing it in college, I just like heard through my friends, they said they're changing rules so they're doing like maths exams and English exams and then they're doing travel and tourism exams. So I'll do it in college pretty much and get tuitions and all that.*

Magda: *Okay. So, after finishing this course [provided by the local council for NEETs] do you want to go back to college or there's a further step? […] So what is the sequence?*

Rosie: *After college -*

Magda: *Not after, before, so when you finish this course at this centre you are doing, so what's the next step?*

Rosie: *… I want to work for a while and then go for like… something to do with customer caring and work there for like, in two years, like a year also*

and then go for uni and then start my uni career… And after that I want to go for my like, my whole dream is like.. it's a long way to go for that.

Magda: *Okay. So you want to work after the course. What kind of job would you like to do?*

Rosie: *Um… what kind of work?... Like administering… like um… I want to, like, actually I wouldn't mind like, I wouldn't mind any jobs, I just want to work and then earn my money and then, yeah.*

Hugh was the only participant in this study who, even after several questions, did not articulate his aspirations in any more precise way than wanting a good life: his ambition for the next two to three years was to have '*a nice,* a *well-paid job', 'to live happy, peaceful'.* His 'ideal self' in ten years' time was depicted in similarly vague fashion: *'Working with a good job… family, living somewhere nice. I don't know.'* At the time of the first interview, Hugh had been NEET for several months. He finished school with no qualifications, then enrolled on a FE course in plumbing but dropped out after some time: '*It wasn't for me. I didn't want to do it. I only joined it because I left school, I had nothing else to do. But then I preferred just to do something more like… find a job or something.*'

To my repeated questions about his future plans, he replied with apparently contradictory statements. For example, he mentioned being interested in apprenticeships: '*I've been trying to look for apprenticeships. But it's hard because I have no GCSEs*.' While he was aware that his lack of qualifications is an impediment for future studies, he seemed ambivalent on improving his qualifications: '*Well, I want to get my GCSEs. But I think now it's too late, I'd just prefer to get a job.*' His near-future plans seemed to be trapped in a catch-22 type situation: he wanted to find a job, first and foremost; however, this seemed impossible due to his lack of qualifications and work experience; and although he realised he needed better qualifications, he wanted to work instead of studying any further. Our conversation seemed to come back to this cyclical argument over and over again:

Hugh: *Recently, yeah, I've been trying to look for apprenticeships. But it's hard because I have no GCSEs… So I'm working with [local authority officer] now.*

Magda: *So, thinking of the future now, what would you like to do?*

Hugh: *Well, I want to get my GCSEs. But I think now it's too late, I'd just prefer to get a job.*

Magda: *You're not even 18!*

Hugh: *Yeah, I know.*

Magda: *That's really young! Why do you think it's too late?*

Hugh: *… I don't know. I'd just prefer to get into working now.*

Magda: *So, what do you think, what kind of obstacles are there for you to find a job?*

Hugh: *So many. There's like, all the jobs, you need either experience in that type of workplace before, or GCSEs, qualifications.*

Magda: *So, what can you do to overcome all these problems?*

Hugh: *Get my GCSEs. [Laughs]*

Magda: *So, now it's the end of May. What would you like to do, in an ideal situation, in October, where would you like to be?*

Hugh: *Have a job, like… just anything to be honest. Just to get a job. Yeah. At the moment, I'm just looking for anything because work is work.*

In addition to not having clearly formulated career aspirations, neither long nor short term, Hugh could not define what kind activities he liked doing. When I asked, he paused for a long time, then replied: *'I'm not too sure really.'* Then, after another long pause: *'Cooking, I like cooking… I like sport, things like that.'* However, he was not looking for a job in any of these fields.

Although these young people (with the exception of Hugh) listed several more and less ambitious aspirations, repeated prompting revealed that in fact, they were ready to accept any job they could find. Their primary goal was gaining employment, while returning to education or training to improve their qualifications did not seem to have subjective value to them, as evidenced by dropping out. It seemed they started various college courses in lack of alternatives. Although both James and Rosie mentioned university, clearly they did not know how to get

there, or even what and why they wanted to study. I had the impression that perhaps they mentioned further studies to me in order to present a more aspirational image of themselves.

From the four participants discussed in this section, three (Hugh, James and Rosie) were NEET at the time of the interview, while Ezra became NEET soon after I met him. While there seems to be a correlation between tentative aspirations and being NEET, it is difficult to ascertain causality, based on this data alone. Since participants were only interviewed after their GCSE exams, their pre-GCSE aspirations were not available for the purpose of this research. Therefore it is not possible to determine whether a lack of future planning contributed to their low achievement, or low academic achievement prevented them from developing higher or more coherent aspirations.

Alternative visions of the future

Based on the interviews, the majority of participants seemed to have accepted the premise that work and career building is of primary importance, that career is the most important anchor of a meaningful life. Only very few participants gave any indication of alternative visions of the future. Hope was the only participant who outright rejected this work-based value system. Her religious belonging, being a Jehovah's Witness, had likely shaped her beliefs about what constitutes a meaningful life. Although Hope performed well in school and at her apprenticeship, and she came across as a very conscientious, ambitious and hard-working young woman, she seemed to interpret work as only a means to an end, a means to achieve happiness, but not the primary source of it. She explained that *'most of my friends [who are also Jehovah's Witnesses] and me, we find that we don't want to work our whole lives and that's just the purpose of it. We want to find joy and be able to associate with each other.'* She explained that for her other aspects of life, such as relationship with friends and family and spirituality are the sources of 'joy' and self-realisations, instead of work/ career:

> *'I want to be able to communicate with people, like one-to-one and it to be a genuine conversation, you know, stay over at each other's houses just talking and laughing and everything. I don't want it to be like occasions, like, probably four times a year or something; I want it to be a regular, ongoing thing. I find that important, and having a happy family life, because I feel like most families, secular work is just their main focus and they lose the joy of bringing up their kids and I've seen how that can affect the children.'*

Hope brought examples of the negative effects of an overly work-oriented lifestyle from her own past and reflecting on her friends:

> *'most of my friends in secondary school, they always complained that their mom or their dad is not taking much interest in them, anything like that, and they began to be unhappy. I find that if you focus on work all the time, then that can be a very bad thing in a way.'*

She explained that her relationship with her mother also deteriorated a few years back when her mother had a more demanding job:

> *'there was a point when my mom's boss gave her a bigger position as a supervisor and I could see, like me, I'd get really emotional because I don't have that close relationship with my mom anymore because of that.'*

Hope felt that she was able to overcome this issue with the support of the 'older women' at the Kingdom Hall[40].

> '*If I didn't have that I'd probably be in a state where, maybe my attitude for my parents would change or something like that. But it wouldn't really be their fault, it was more of the pressure on work basically'* – Hope explained her stance on work.

Another participant who indicated that finding and maintaining work is not his most important goal was Ezra. While he mentioned his acting aspirations, his main passion was anime, spending all his free time immersed in it:

> '*Anime is a big part of my life. […] I've watched over 300 different animes and there's just so many there. When I'm not doing work, I'm at home and when I'm at home, all I do is either watch anime or play games and then other than that I go out that's exactly my life.*'

Just like most participants, Ezra connected his passion/ hobby with work. He mentioned that he would like working in a shop selling anime*: 'so I wouldn't mind working in that store cos I know everything about, like all the things they stocked up and I know how to talk to customers about things.'* He also fantasised about moving to Japan, so he can fully immerse himself in the world of anime: '*so in the future, cos, you know, I love anime and stuff and I love anything*

[40] A Kingdom Hall is a place of worship for Jehovah's Witnesses.

Japan, cos I like, love the food and the culture and everything, one day like I would love to live there.'

Both Hope and Ezra seemed to have alternative future aspirations: unlike the rest of participants, they seemed to interpret work and career as secondary to other life goals. However, their attitude towards both work and their main goal was very different. Whereas Ezra did not seem to have a plan on how to achieve either goal – his occupational aspiration of becoming an actor or his passion for anime - Hope had a well-defined strategy. After her GCSEs, she strategically chose an apprenticeship (with a little detour to FE college) and was working and studying very conscientiously. Interestingly and importantly, her alternative value system - considering work as a means only to more important future goals - did not seem to diminish her work ethic or lower her career aspirations. In this sense, the category of alternative aspirations overlaps with other types, at least in the two cases discussed here: while both emphasized that they do not consider careers as the main source of meaning in their lives, the educational and occupational aspirations they presented followed similar patterns to those described under other aspiration types. Ezra's career aspirations were similar to tentative aspirations, while Hope presented her future training and career plans in a linear fashion.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter explored participants' aspirations and discussed them in the light of contemporary theoretical and policy debates, while the taller section introduced a typology of aspirations that I develop during this study.

To summarise the aspirations of the young people from this study, many presented well defined future aspirations, mostly formulated in terms of education and jobs. While some were aiming for one specific job, others thought about back-up plans, fall-back occupations in case their main aspirations proved too difficult to achieve. A few participants seemed to prefer to keep their career options open and concentrate on their studies, for the time. Others considered several unrelated occupations, but it seemed, they were not preparing strategically for either of these. Only one participant, Hugh, seemed unable to describe his career aspiration, although he, too, was aiming for 'the good life', just like the rest of participants. And finally, two participants presented alternative visions of the future, considering career goals secondary to other goals in life. However, their approach to career strategizing was distinctly different.

In my sample, most young people interpreted aspirations in terms of educational and occupational goals, as it is also prevalent in policy and research, as well as in schools. The

majority of participants did not differentiate between expectations or 'realistic' aspirations and dreams or 'ideal' aspirations, perhaps due to being slightly older, post-GCSEs. Only those identified as having tentative aspirations articulated a difference between their expectations and ideals (with the exception of Hugh). This group was composed of young people NEET at the time (or becoming soon, in the case of Ezra), who did not have any qualifications. Although their primary aspiration was getting a job, their specific circumstances made that goal very difficult to achieve; which might explain why their expectations and dreams/ aspirations differed. In addition, it was also discussed that young people in my research strived to present an aspirational identity, attributed to the success of the policy discourse on 'raising aspiration', and likely amplified by the specific research context – focusing on aspirations specifically. It was also found that, in line with previous research, young people tended to have high aspirations in terms of both education and careers, although some did not know how to achieve their aspirations. On the other hand, my findings did not reflect fears about 'millennials' unrealistically high aspirations. Instead, participants' aspirations evidenced a perhaps dated understanding of the London job market, young people mostly aiming for conventional, long-established occupations.

I identified four types of career aspirations in my participants' narratives: linear, open and tentative aspiration, and alternative visions of the future, based largely on the strategies described and the subjective values attached to the aspirations presented. This typology emerged from the data, through an inductive, iterative process of data analysis, as it was described earlier. I argue that this aspiration typology offers an original contribution to the study of young people's aspirations, future planning and decision-making, and more broadly, to the literature on youth transitions. It can also provide an easy to use diagnostic tool for education practitioners, youth workers and career advisers.

The next chapters will further analyse young people's beliefs and attitudes regarding aspirations and the transition from education to employment and their strategies of implementation in light of the longitudinal data.

CHAPTER 7. CONSTRUCTING ASPIRATIONS

Introduction

The previous chapter (*Chapter 6*) presented the educational and occupational aspirations of the 15 young people who participated in this study: what they were aiming for and the strategies they intended to use to realise their ambitions, as they described them initially, in the first round of the interviews. At the time, all participants have passed the age of compulsory education (which has changes over the lifetime of the project) and have transitioned into further education or vocational training, with a few of them being NEET. Chapter 6 provided a snapshot view of their aspirations at a comparable time in their lives.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore participants' aspirations from a longitudinal perspective, taking into account the whole amount of data collected from participants, building on but also complicating the findings from the previous chapter. The longitudinal approach highlighted the fluid and dynamic nature of aspirations, and allowed to explore their embeddedness in social networks and specific socio-economic, cultural, local and historic contexts. *Chapter 7: Constructing aspirations* investigates young people's career decision-making process, looking into the diverse factors that shaped their aspirations. Then, *Chapter 8: Implementing aspirations* will consider the strategies employed to achieve these aspirations. In these chapters, I draw on conceptual tools from Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus, including habitus, field and different forms of capital, as well as *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1984; 1985; 1990; 1998; 2000). The concepts of 'horizons for action' and career construction developed in the context of the careership theory by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and Hodkinson (2008) has also informed my analysis.

One of the research questions explored in this study relates to the construction of young people's educational and occupational aspirations. To that end, this chapter looks into participants' career decision making, and investigates the different factors that played a part in shaping their aspirations. This topic was primarily explored during the first interview, through a number of questions, such as: *'Why do you want to become a…?'; What gave you that idea?'; 'What do you like about this job?'; 'What motivates you to achieve that?'; 'What are the 3 most important things you are looking for in a job?'* Then, probing and follow-up questions were asked at the second interview. More importantly though, given the fluidity of aspirations,

the repeat interviews provided opportunity to gain insight into the process of career decision-making and aspiration formation, especially when there was change between the interviews.

In this chapter I will focus on two dimensions of constructing aspirations: motivational factors and 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008) – including relevant opportunity structures, dispositions and significant biographical elements. Before moving on to the analysis, however, methodological issues related to the longitudinal qualitative research design will be explained.

Methodological considerations

As discussed in *Chapter 4: Methodology*, the longitudinal qualitative research design is well suited to researching complex processes and understanding continuity and change in people's lives (Thomson, 2007; Vincent, 2013; Ryan, Rodriguez and Trevena, 2016). Conducting repeat interviews with participants provided rich, contextualised data about the complex structures and mechanisms that impacted on participants' experiences and aspirations during their educational trajectories and transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives. This allowed me to probe the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors in changes of aspirations and plans and '*to make connections between the micro and the macro'* (Vincent, 2013: 352).

In addition to the two rounds of interviews, I had access to further longitudinal data. It was explained in Chapter 4 that eight participants took part in a very detailed school survey in the spring of 2014, half to one year before the initial interview. In addition, after the second interview, I acquired further information relating to education, employment and aspirations from some of the participants, from various sources: being connected on social media, and when I contacted them regarding RESL.eu-related events (as described in Chapter 4). These snippets of information were also incorporated into the analysis, because they likely shaped my understanding of their trajectories. Including these data into the analysis only makes transparent the full amount of information available to me.

It is important to highlight that the educational and occupational status of participants during the second interview or after were not interpreted as 'outcomes'. Instead, these are understood as subsequent stages in the dynamic and fluid process of aspiration formation and transitioning from education to the next steps in their lives. As the data will show, young people's status can change significantly: some who were NEET during the first interview gained employment or re-engaged with education by the seconds, while others who were studying before became NEET. Not only does young people's status change, their aspirations can shift drastically too.

Therefore it would be wrong to treat their accounts as 'outcome' data at any point during the study.

As explained in *Chapter 4: Methodology*, the length of time between the two interviews differed among participants, from over one and a half years to 5 months, due to the research design of the larger RESL.eu project (see Table 8 below). This needs to be taken into account when analysing change between the two interviews, and as a consequence, the longitudinal data is less suitable for comparative analysis. However, the repeat interviews provided rich and complex data pertaining to the 15 participants' experiences at the end and after compulsory education. These accounts were analysed individually, the two interviews treated as opportunities to gain deeper and more detailed information relevant to answering the research questions.

Table 8. The timing of interviews

Name	1st interview	2nd interview	Intervening period (months)
Aisha	Nov 2014	Aug 2016	21
Darius	Nov 2014	Mar 2016	16
Flora	Nov 2014	Mar 2016	16
Mina	Nov 2014	Mar 2016	16
Ezra	Apr 2015	July 2016	15
Kurt	June 2015	July 2016	13
Greg	Apr 2015	Apr 2016	12
Evie	June 2015	Apr 2016	10
Hope	Nov 2015	July 2016	8
Maria	Dec 2015	July 2016	8
Reuben	Dec 2015	May 2016	6
Adam	May 2016	Sept 2016	5
Hugh	May 2016	Sept 2016	5
James	May 2016	Oct 2016	5
Rosie	May 2016	Oct 2016	5

Although relatively short time had passed between the two interviews, this covered a significant period in young people's lives: the transition from school/ college/ apprenticeship to the next step in their educational and/ or occupational trajectories - for those who were in education or training initially. In the case of NEETs, the repeat interviews were conducted in the following academic year after the first one, in order to pick up on eventual return to education.

In the analysis, time was approached from multiple perspectives, paying attention to subjective dimensions of temporality - participants' subjective experiences of change and continuity happening through time and the meanings attached to these, as well as the wider historical context young people's transition was located in.

Change and continuity over time

Participants trajectories and aspirations were already described in detail in *Chapter 5: Interlude - 15 Portraits*. Table 9 below summarises participants educational/ employment status and aspirations at the time of the two interviews. Also, additional information obtained from them the year after the second interview was also added. The aim of the table is to present changes and continuities over time, in a simple, clear way. Of course, young people's aspirations were more complex than it can be presented in a table format. These complexities will be explored in more detail in the next two chapters.

Table 9. Change and continuity over time

	1st interview (2014-16)			2nd interview, 2016			2017
Name	**Status**	**Educational Aspirations**	**Occupational Aspirations**	**Status**	**Educational Aspirations**	**Occupational Aspirations**	**Status**
Adam	NEET	FE college	Horticulture	NEET	FE college	Construction	*
Aisha	A levels	University	Lawyer	University	Masters	Lawyer	University, Law
Darius	A levels	University	Doctor	Employed	University	Optometrist	University
Evie	NEET	No short term plan	Nursery Assistant	Employed	No short term plans	Nursery Assistant	Employed, Nursery
Ezra	FE college	No further plans	Actor/ Shop Assistant	NEET	No further plans	Any job	*
Flora	A levels	University	Media, Editor	University	Complete University	Media, Sound mixing	University, Media
Greg	FE college	FE college + Apprentice	System Administrator	FE college	University	System Administrator	FE college, ICT
Hope	Apprentice	Higher Apprentice	Business Admin	Apprentice	Higher Apprentice	Business Admin, Events	Apprentice
Hugh	NEET	Unsure	Any job	NEET	FE college/ Apprentice	Any job	*
James	NEET	Unsure	Fitness/ IT/ Any job	NEET	Apprentice	Business Admin	Apprentice
Kurt	NEET	University	Paediatric Nurse	NEET	University	Disability Sports	University, Sport Science
Maria	Apprentice	No further plans	Childcare/Teaching Assistant	Apprentice	No further plans	Teaching assistant	*
Mina	A levels	University	Law/ Politics	A levels	University	Law	University, Law
Reuben	Apprentice	Unsure	Unsure	Apprentice	University	Job in NHS	Employed, NHS
Rosie	NEET	Unsure	Flight Assistant/ Any	NEET	Apprentice	Business Admin	*

*No data

What motivates young people?

Young people's aspirations have been an important focus of enquiry in education and youth research, as discussed in *Chapter 3: Literature Review*. While there is growing data on the relationship between aspirations and outcomes, on the one hand, and different socio-demographic variables such as class, gender, ethnicity/ race and so on, on the other; the theorisation of the concept remains relatively neglected[41]. As such, the underlying mechanisms

[41] An edited book specifically on this topic has just been published at the time of finishing my thesis (Stahl et al., 2019).

through which aspirations are constructed is little understood. The following sections will address this issue, focusing on motivational factors and horizons for action.

It was discussed earlier that young people's generally high aspirations might be driven, to some extent, by the ubiquitous discourse around raising aspirations and normative expectations at schools (and home, likely). To better understand career decision-making, I argue, we need to investigate what other discourses and ideologies are communicated directly and indirectly to young people that might shape their aspirations. Analysing the data, it became clear that young people held common beliefs not only about the 'acceptable level' of aspirations, but also about the 'appropriate criteria' one was supposed to apply when defining them. As such, virtually all participants identified emotional satisfaction derived from doing what they like/ enjoy/ love or being able to help others/ give back to society as their main motivations when deciding on future careers. Although financial rewards and pragmatic considerations (such as job security and having a comfortable job) were mentioned by some, participants emphasised the utmost importance of intrinsic motivations, and tended to downplay or justify considering financial factors. The implicit value judgements, revealed through the specific motivational factors mentioned, the order in which they were presented and participants attitudes towards them, alluded to underlying understandings, beliefs about the 'right' mechanisms and criteria how one is supposed to choose their future occupation.

As mentioned in *Chapter 3. Literature review*, *illusio* is a useful concept to analyse beliefs, attitudes and values towards education and work. In the context of this study, transitioning from school to work can be conceptualised as the 'game' in which young people struggle for success – achieving their aspirations and finding a suitable job. During this struggle they often occupy a liminal space, moving across different related and sometimes overlapping social fields, such as education, career guidance (Hodkinson, 2008) and economic fields, including the various professional fields they are aiming for.

So, how is young people's relationship to the field of work? What kind of beliefs, values and attitudes shaped their aspiration narratives? What drove them to invest into the game of transitions; to put effort, affect and time into achieving their aspirations? How has their illusio shaped their post-school transitions? The following sections will explore these questions.

Interest in a field, joy and love

While young people listed various motivations for their aspirations/ future careers, there was one common theme: almost all declared that they wanted a job they '*like*', '*enjoy*' doing,

something *they* are '*interested in'*. For example, Mina said[42]: '*I either want to study International Law or Political Economics because that's what I'm really* <u>*interested in*</u>[43]*, I* <u>*like*</u> *these subjects.'* Flora's answer was very similar: '*What's essential is* <u>*to be interested in,*</u> <u>*to get my attention*</u>*. So I wouldn't like to do something what I* <u>*don't like*</u>*. So this is my most important perspective, to* <u>*enjoy*</u> *what I do.*' Even Hugh, who did not articulate his aspirations and motivations, when prompted, agreed that enjoying work is very important:

> '*When I'm working, it has to be something, like, you* <u>*enjoy*</u> *it. I don't want to be stuck in like a job that I hate. Obviously, you have to do that stuff in life, but when I've got a job that I'm settled with, I want it to be something I* <u>*enjoy*</u>*.*'

'Enjoyment' of a particular field or job was listed by other participants too as a major motivating factor: '*it's mainly because I* <u>*enjoy,*</u> <u>*like*</u> *the field and* <u>*like*</u> *studying the anatomy of the body and stuff like that... but in addition to that I also* <u>*enjoy*</u> *sciences*' – Darius explained his choice. Similarly, Greg said: '*for me, it's the* <u>*enjoying*</u> *what I do in the work, that's the main thing for me, that's why I chose that specific job because it's what I would like to do personally.'* James used similar terms: '*something that keeps you motivated, (...) something that you* <u>*enjoy*</u> *doing.*'

It has been noted before that in many western countries *'individual interest and ability [...] are posited as the primary criteria upon which choices should be made'* (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2015:592). It does seem common-sensical why young people orient themselves towards occupations and fields they are interested in, since why would anyone choose deliberately to be bored at their job? Plus, as Mina reckoned, '*if it's boring, you're not going to do your job well, that's the problem.*' The idea – illusio - that one has to enjoy their job, is so ubiquitous that its socially constructed and historically contingent nature is seldom scrutinized (e.g. Tokumitsu, 2014; 2015). However, formulating career-choice in terms of intrinsic motivations of interest and enjoyment – that I will call the romantic illusio of work - is in fact a relatively recent development. Tokumitsu (2015) highlighted that *'[w]ell into the twentieth century, work was virtuous precisely because it was not fun, because it was in the service of a project grander and more eternal than fleeting individual pleasure.*' It seems that the illusio of work has changed significantly over the last century.

[42] The questions were asked in a neutral fashion, such as 'Why do you want to become…'.
[43] Highlighted by me.

Moreover, some participants drew on the language of romantic love when describing their educational or career choices. For instance, Darius described a good job as *'something that you have to enjoy, and you can actually get up in the morning for and just go. It always has its highs and lows but as long as it's something you love then you'll probably enjoy it.*' Referring to his future job, Kurt said: '*I'll be doing what I love full-time*'. Aisha also used the word 'love' when talking about her interests: '*I loved, I used to love science',* while Adam referred to losing interest in catering as '*I've sort of fallen out of love with catering*.' Tokumitsu argued (2014, 2015) that '*do what you love (DWYL)'* is '*the unofficial work mantra for our time'* (2014).

Through this rhetoric of 'work as love', future careers, occupations and jobs are conceptualised as objects of desire, sources of satisfaction and meaning in life, not only means to earn an income. As Maria, a childcare apprentice, explained:

> '*it's important for me to love the job, to give the best quality, because I can't do something that I don't like. [...] if I'm working with children, if I don't like it then I won't help them progress. I will just mess up their education, everything, which is why it's important for you to like what you're doing, to be able to support them, otherwise you can never support them. And obviously, this will make you happy, and them at the same time.'*

From the 15 Londoners from this study only Hope and Reuben (who were completing a Business Administration and a hospital-based apprenticeship, respectively) questioned the validity and efficacy of choosing a career based on interest/ joy. Initially, Hope chose a college course based on what she liked, but dropped out soon to take up a more practical programme :

> *'Originally, as I said, when I was in college, I did Art (...) But I found that it's not (...) really practical in today's society, more IT and business related. So I thought okay, maybe I should do something more practical and keep those things as hobbies.'*

Reuben did not mention interest or joy-based motivations when listing the most important criteria he was looking for in a job. When prompted, his answer reflected an inner struggle between aligning with the romantic illusio – formulated in quite vague, general terms, and a more practical stance, which seemed to have stemmed from personally experiencing the difficulties of finding a job in London:

> *'A job is a job at the end of the day, but I think it is important to like what you're doing, because your interest remains in the job, it doesn't just vanish after a few months,*

> *you're actually enjoying what you're doing. But if you don't enjoy it… I don't know, a job is a job at the end of the day. It's hard to get a job in London.'*

Based on my data, apprentices from this study were more likely to formulate their career choice based on practical reasoning. Nonetheless, intrinsic preferences played a part in their narratives too; for example, Reuben compared his college course with the apprenticeship as such:

> *'I realised that college was not for me. (….) I'm more of a hands-on person. I'm more of a practical person. I didn't really enjoy… I didn't mind it, but I didn't really enjoy studying and paperwork all the time, I prefer doing the hands-on practical things.'*

Interest as an attribute

Several participants claimed a long-term interest in their specific field: *'I've been interested in making films from an early age and I'm very interested in editing programmes, have always been*', Flora told me. Similarly, others said: '*ever since I was little, I always loved children*' (Evie)*; 'since I could remember I've always liked acting'* (Ezra); '*I've always been interested in politics*' (Mina). The phrasing suggests that these young people understood their 'interest' in a field not as something gained through experience and practice but more as an innate personality trait. Greg's comment is particularly revealing: '*I've always had a passion for computers, but I didn't really notice it at the beginning, at the time.*' Greg completed his compulsory education in Spain (without achieving any qualifications), where he attended low-performing, poorly equipped schools and his family lived in deep poverty. He was already 16 years old when he gained access to computers, at the Bridging course[44] after moving back to London. Interestingly, Greg interpreted his late-blooming attraction to IT as 'not noticing' an already existing - but perhaps hidden, unconscious 'interest', and not as 'gaining' a 'new interest' through exposure to new experiences, areas of studies and activities. According to this interpretation, interests – thus aspirations – are 'discovered' instead of being 'developed'.

The combination of these two assumptions: 'interest/ enjoyment/ love' as the main criteria for defining aspirations and 'interest' as an innate personality trait, can have serious implications for young people's future planning. Locating 'interest' inside the person, the romantic illusio of work seems to encourage an inward, retrospective gaze when searching for aspirations, instead of promoting engagement with existing and new activities, studies and experiences.

[44] Bridging courses are provided for students over 16 who left compulsory education with qualifications below the minimum expected standard, 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Math at the time of the research.

Indeed, the data shows that interest/ enjoyment/ love on its own might be insufficient motivational force for some, which might limit options prematurely and lead to drop-out and low attainment. Ezra, for example, was only interested in drama and anime. His local college however, did not offer a drama course and he felt uncomfortable travelling further away from home. Since according to the new regulations he still had to be in education at 16/17, Ezra enrolled on a level 1 Science course, which was below his GCSEs qualification. Not being interested in the course, he dropped out eventually. Next year, he refused to embark on a new course and became NEET by the second interview:

> *'I've been like looking but there's nothing I really wanted to do or something I think I'll like... There are things I could do for the sake of doing but I don't think I'll be able to finish it, cause if I'm not interested in a course I can't motivate myself to finish it. Like that science course, like especially towards the end I was getting really lazy [...] cause I just lost interest.*'

Ezra experienced a multitude of difficulties during his education: he reported having learning difficulties, physical illnesses and disability, which all impacted negatively on his school engagement and academic attainment. However, he articulated his disengagement from education in terms of a lack of interest in the courses on offer.

Although Ezra wanted to become an actor initially , he gave up on this dream by the second interview. He explained this by not enjoying the process of working towards his aspiration, of putting effort into securing a job or more experience in the field:

> '*I wanted to have a future in acting and I still do want that, but I don't think I could put enough... Like [best friend], the effort he puts into it is way more [...], he goes to auditions and everything and stuff. I just can't be bothered for it. Like I really like acting but I don't think I'll want to make all that stuff, the audition and stuff. [...] It seems like a lot of effort, you know, you just don't want to really do. I just have fun acting and that's why I wanted to do it.'*

While Ezra seemed to had accepted the validity of the romantic illusio of work, the grip of this illusio in his case was rather weak: unlike his best friend, he did not feel motivated enough to engage with the acting field. Then, a lack of interest in any other jobs potentially available to him seemed to impede his job-search: *'My auntie helped me look at some, a few, but nothing I really want to do, like especially too near to me'* – he explained. His father, a 'kitchen fitter',

provided work to his brother, and Ezra, too, worked for him for a few days. But again, he did not like the job so did not want to engage with it for longer: '*I wouldn't do that for a living though. [...] I kind of got very, very bored, [...] it got too repetitive: smashing tiles, clearing up, sanding, just all that stuff.'*

Ezra's story clearly illustrates the dangers of an exclusive focus on interest in occupation choice and the romantic illusio of work. Having limited interests and not enjoying the process of working towards his ambition, Ezra was left with no options in terms of job aspirations. As a result, by the second interview he became NEET and was living in a garden shed his father built him, watching anime all day: '*My main thing is I watch a lot of Japanese animes. [...] Without that [...] I'll be like bored most of the time.'* Spending time on his only remaining interest, Ezra felt happy: '*in terms of enjoyment I've enjoyed this year a lot.'*

The ubiquitous 'work as joy' idea has tremendous surface appeal due to its positive, upbeat message and simplicity. However, as Ezra's story shows, interest and enjoyment alone might be insufficient criteria for defining one's aspirations. Young people at this age usually have relatively little work experience, therefore their understanding of what they 'enjoy' in terms of jobs can be limited. They might limit their choices prematurely based on the illusio that future occupations have to be decided upon existing interests. This can be especially detrimental for those whose exposure to study subjects, activities and experiences in education and outside of it has been limited. Abrahams' research (2016) demonstrated the substantial differences between schools regarding the subjects on offer for students. Thus, young people from less privileged backgrounds have access to a much narrower range of subjects to study and extra-curricular activities at school, which might limit their aspirations, especially combined with the illusio that interest is something that one possesses from an early age.

In addition, the notion of 'work as joy' does not provide explanation and incentive for the less enjoyable aspects of work and job search, which seem to have led Ezra to give up on his aspiration of becoming an actor. Also, some occupations are harder to interpret through the lens of interest and enjoyment, especially those which young people with low academic attainment might have easier access to. The romantic illusio of work – together with the discourse around high aspirations – further devalues manual occupations.

> '*Under the DWYL [do what you love] credo, labor that is done out of motives or needs other than love (which is, in fact, most labor) is not only demeaned but erased. [...]*

unlovable but socially necessary work is banished from the spectrum of consciousness altogether.' (Tokumitsu, 2014)

Hugh, for instance, had dropped out of a plumbing course before because he did not like it. When I met him the second time, he was considering to start the same course anew, for practical reasons: *'I did do plumbing but it was a few years ago. I didn't like it, but I'm grown up more, like matured now and I know I need to do it.'*

In Bourdieu's theoretical framework, illusio is equated with 'investment' (Bourdieu, 1998; 2000). Accordingly, the more one invests into a game, the more they get 'invested' in it, '*caught up in and by the game*' (Bourdieu, 1998:76). The romantic illusio of work that most participants assumed – which regards work an interest/ joy/ love – obscures the process how illusio generally functions, specifically that investment in a game precedes interest. Therefore, it can limit young people's choices by binding them to their previous experiences. As such, this illusio might hinder the transformative potential of aspirations, which could be a tool for social mobility. In addition, it also renders invisible for the purpose of aspirations those jobs which are harder to describe in the language of interest, joy and love.

Altruistic motivations

Another fairly common theme across the interviews was young people's desire for meaningful work: to make a difference, help others, give back to society. For Kurt, who had serious health issues including cerebral palsy and epilepsy, these were the primary motives of his aspiration to become a paediatric nurse. He wanted to work with sick and disabled children, as he perceived them to be the most vulnerable: *'I'll leave work every day knowing that I've helped someone: that reward, that good feeling of just making someone's life better.'* At the first interview, Kurt seemed highly committed to this aspiration and presented a feasible strategy on how to achieve it. However, by the second interview, both his educational and occupational aspirations had changed:

> *'I think I was chasing nursing for the wrong reasons*. […] *I think when I was so ill with the epilepsy and I wanted to give something back for generic reasoning and, I don't know, in the last few years, I've just been so involved around sport and especially my judo and stuff like that. And I know nursing would have took me away from that. And it just… it didn't add up. I still want to work with people. I'm thinking of going into sports therapy or disability sports. So I still want to work with people, supporting individuals but just not in the care/clinical setting of hospitals, I guess.'*

Kurt's passion was judo, he had been involved with it from childhood and in the year between the two interviews he won a European title. He seemed to have derived symbolic capital from winning such a prestigious award (although he felt unable to convert it into economic capital at the time), increasing his confidence and interest in the field. His growing investment of effort and time into judo and the time commitment required at the nursing course made him re-evaluate his aspirations. Kurt also seemed to had come to terms with his disability: instead of denying the limitations it caused, as in the first interview, he built it into his new aspiration. The two career aspirations – nursing and sport therapy/ disability sport – seem very distant at first. Significantly though, Kurt explained the change as finding a way to follow his primary motivation – helping others, especially disabled and ill children – more successfully by combining it with his passion:

> '*It was all like different elements coming together and it just made sense. […] Doing a sports and exercise degree with judo and gym-work and fitness, they will just go alongside each other so nicely and I'll be able to incorporate my judo into my degree. Incorporate my degree into my judo. It just makes sense. I'll be doing what I love full-time.'*

Kurt's story also underlines the power of the romantic illusio of work: he found his 'true calling', the aspiration he actually persisted with when the romantic and altruistic illusio of work aligned. Several other participants also combined altruistic and 'romantic' motivations:

> *'The satisfaction that I can make a difference, I like making a difference in wherever it is I'm working.'* (Adam)

> *'I've always wanted to help other people, that's why I also wanted to help with the social care cause I'm always willing to do stuff with care whether it was animals, older people, children, I just love caring for everyone really.'* (Evie)

> *'I like to help people that are... I wouldn't say in trouble, but need help.'* (Reuben)

Evie and Kurt aspired to caring professions, nursery assistant and paediatric nurse/ sport therapy, respectively, while Reuben planned to work as a clinical technician in a hospital setting. It seems they had already aligned with their field's illusio - that altruistic joy of helping others provides the highest form of work satisfaction, or in Reuben's case, pragmatic considerations and altruistic motivations intertwined.

However, altruistic motivations were also mentioned by participants who aspired for non-caring occupations: Adam, for instance, wanted to work in horticulture and later, construction. Hope, a Jehovah's Witness wanting to work in business administration, considered freelancing to accommodate voluntary work and '*be a missionary in other countries [...] go to another country with my partner or my friends and be able to help somewhere else.'* Aisha, who wanted to become a lawyer, emphasized the helping aspect of law, that she will be able to provide support and advice to her clients. Participants aspiring for occupations which were more difficult to frame in terms of altruistic motivations, mentioned their desire to set up a charity later on. Mina, who by the second interview formulated more concrete career aspiration, said:

> '*I want to work in a good law firm as a good solicitor, and I want to have like still a charity on the side where I can help other countries [...] such as the Arab countries that you know, the people that actually need help; so you go and… small things like giving them clothes, food, you know, just support, a helping hand, that's it.'*

Rosie, who was NEET at both inetrviews with tentative career aspirations, also wanted to help others: '*I've got a little wish, a little dream, I want to help out those children and people who've got cancer and give them, you know help them out with money and everything.'*

Based on my data, the altruistic illusio of work seems to be more field-specific than the generally accepted romantic illusio, and connected to people-centred occupations. However, the number of young people who felt compelled to mention altruistic motivations – realised perhaps outside of work – attests to the importance of the altruistic illusio. This was a remarkable finding as most participants came from very disadvantaged backgrounds. However, without more data on this topic, one can only speculate about the origin of the altruistic work illusio.

Aptitude, competence, talent

Participants' narratives on their career decision making often contained references to specific talents, strengths and aptitudes. However, these rarely emerged as the primary motivations. Instead, they seemed to be more important in the elimination process, when deciding on what not to choose for further studies and work. Talent or aptitude was only mentioned as an important motive in career-choice when it led to interest. For instance, Ezra connected ability and joy: *'I'm good at improvising and stuff and I enjoy it, that's the main thing.'*

However, even in this context, aptitude was not necessarily the primary criterion. For example, Aisha and Flora both chose subjects they were interested in, while dropping others they had good results in. Aisha achieved well in science, however she enjoyed 'debates' more, therefore decided on studying law. Flora, dropped maths in which she excelled at GCSEs, in order to study media instead.

Greg described the process of aspiration formation from competence through interest as such:

> *'When I was studying my course last year it was, there was ICT related into the course and I was really good at it, so I realised that I'd like to do that because I was good at it and now I'm here now doing Level 2. I started looking into it more and it seems like something that I would be good at in the future.'*

It seems that the conversion of ability/ competence/ talent into aspiration is a dynamic, longitudinal process, operating on complex feedback loops: 'being good' in a subject and perhaps getting praise leads to investment into that field, resulting in more achievement and praise, re-enforcing belief in ability, and eliciting further investment. Tellingly, Greg did mention being supported by his ICT teacher, pointing to the interactive nature of aspiration formation and the role of teacher support. Similarly, Flora also singled out one teacher she had particularly good relationship with, her media tutor, which might have impacted on her aspirations.

Financial motivations

As presented in *Chapter 2. Background to the study*, official policy discourses in the UK tend to depict young people as 'intelligent customers' in the education market, creating an expectation that students in compulsory education will be capable of making financially sound informed choices regarding their educational strategies and future jobs. At odds with this expectation, my interviews with young Londoners revealed that financial motivations do not necessarily feature in their aspiration narratives; in fact, several participants tended to downplay their role. The majority considered intrinsic motivations such as interest, enjoying/ loving a subject or occupation, and giving back to the community – labelled the romantic and altruistic illusio of work - more important. Kurt, who wanted to become a paediatric nurse initially, outright refused to take financial rewards into consideration: *'The salary for nursing is terrible! [...] I don't think you could, you would never go into nursing for the money.'* Clearly, he was aware of low pay in this field, but it did not affect his choice:

‘money’s just not important to me, I don’t find it important. I would rather be happy in my job, wake up every day, enjoy my job rather than waking up being, I don’t know, a solicitor earning thousands and thousands, thousands, thousands, and being bored.’

Others, even some who aspired to well-paid professions, tried to downplay the importance of good earning potential. For example, Aisha explained:

‘I don’t think really jobs are all about money, it’s about people. […] It’s also that you enjoy the job and you know that you’ll be good at it and then it’s also good for you and other people around you. So I don’t think I want to be a lawyer just for the money.’

Even Adam, who grew up in care and lived in poverty with no family support, did not consider salary an important criteria in career decision making: *‘As long as I can live comfortably with what I get paid, it doesn’t bother me. As long as it doesn’t leave me with no money, as long as it leaves me with some money, so I can go out and socialise, then I’m fine.’* Evie, volunteering at a nursery while living at home with her parents, seemed almost apologetic for expecting salary at all:

‘*For me it’s not just about getting the money […] I would happily volunteer every day without money. But I still need the money for myself as well to pay for rent and food and for basic, like, stuff. […] I’d happily be the last one to leave there and the first one to be there.’*

As these quotes exemplify, the rejection of financial motivations was often formulated in relation to motivations based on the romantic or altruistic illusio of work - emphasizing that emotional satisfaction derived from work is more important than the financial rewards. The previous quote from Evie underlines Tokumitsu’s argument (2015) that embracing the romantic illusio can expose one to exploitation: ‘*when passion becomes the socially accepted motivation for working, talk of wages or reasonable scheduling becomes crass*’ (Tokumitsu, 2015: 7). Evie, who at the time had been volunteering for years in the hope of being offered a paid job as a result, proclaimed her readiness to continue working for free ‘*happily*’. What is more, she felt compelled to explain why she needs a salary at all.

Tokumitsu argues (2014; 2015) that by reclassifying work as love/ pleasure, the DWYL doctrine – referred to as the romantic illusio of work in this thesis - obscures the sacrifices made by workers and devalues labour that is performed out of different motivations. As such, ‘*masking the very exploitative mechanisms of labor that it fuels, DWYL is, in fact, the most*

perfect ideological tool of capitalism' (Tokumitsu, 2014), she concludes. Evie's years of free work (that she was able to undertake only because her family supported her financially in the meantime) seem to support this argument.

However, not all participants aligned exclusively with the romantic/ altruistic illusio. Opinions differed substantially regarding the relevance of financial factors with a number of young people mentioning financial motivations. For example, Darius, Flora and Maria (who wanted to become a doctor, work in the media and in childcare, respectively), mentioned salary as their third criteria for a good job, after several prompts:

> '*if I was working in London it will be pretty expensive so… like... just paying for bills and stuff like that… from your wages, that's probably the third reason so it's the wages*.' (Darius)
>
> '*Well, mostly money; that how much you can earn with this job. I think editors earn quite well. […] Because if you get a job, you can get an apartment, a family.*' (Flora)
>
> '*Well, yes, of course, because obviously London is really expensive, like travel, and even rent.'* (Maria)

Interestingly, it seemed they felt the need to explain why they consider earnings, as Darius and Maria connected financial motives with the cost of living in London, while Flora with wanting to have a family and apartment.

While not referring to money specifically, some participants mentioned extrinsic motivations. For Mina, the lifestyle that a good salary would allow seemed very attractive: '*What motivates me […] to have your own house, your own car, you know, living a good life, have a good job, that's basically what I want to do so that's what motivates me*.' Later on in the interview, she mentioned it again: *'[a law or politics degree] will give you a good job in the future. You will achieve good money and it would just be a good job and that's what I would like to be doing.'* Reuben also formulated his aspirations in terms of the purchase power of his salary: '*I don't know job-wise what I want to do, but all I know is that I want to have a nice house and buy my mum a house as well.'*

As these quotes exemplify, even those mentioning financial motivations seemed to have fairly modest expectations in terms of economic rewards: '*I want to be financially comfortable',* Rueben said; James and Rosie wanted '*a good salary',* while Adam's expectation was only to

have something left after paying the bills. Becoming wealthy – as opposed to getting a 'good salary' that provides for a comfortable life – appeared only in Reuben's narrative. He felt motivated by his uncle's example who worked as a financial advisor: *'the wealth kind of ... motivates me'*, he said. His role models were '*rich and famous'* musicians, '*because of their houses, their cars and their life'*. Reuben was one of the only three participants, together with Greg and James, who mentioned financial rewards first when asked about their motivations[45]. In fact, the possibility of earning a salary while studying and getting a qualification was a major attraction in apprenticeships for Reuben: *'The reason I wanted to do it is because ... I don't know, it might sound wrong, but I kind of ... I like to learn, but I also like to learn while I earn.'* However, while financial motivations were clearly very important for him, Reuben questioned the validity of these motivations, he felt '*it might sound wrong'* to consider earnings in career choice.

Similarly, Greg, who grew up in deep poverty, was also keen on securing a well-paid job: '*my primary focus that drawn me to ICT was the money because everyone knows that there's a lot of money in computers; technology is growing rapidly and all that.'* Nonetheless, he then felt the need to soften his stance on the importance of financial motivations:

> '*But it was just, mainly it was because I liked doing it and that's how I came onto this course in the first place, cause I liked what I was doing so I decided to go further into it but it's just cos there's many benefits to ICT is why I realised I'd like to do it.'*

Clearly, several participants considered financial rewards when choosing a training course or future career. Interestingly, however, they seemed conflicted about this motive, as shown by their tendency to highlight other motivations such as interest, or expressing feelings that this approach to aspirations might be 'wrong', as Reuben did.

While the scale of the study does not allow for wider generalization on which young people might be more prone to express financial motivations, based on my data, this attitude did not seem to be directly correlated with socio-economic background: Adam, perhaps the most disadvantaged participant, denied the importance of financial factors just like Aisha did, who came from a very wealthy background.

[45] While all three participants who mentioned financial rewards first were male, the present data does not seem consistent and sufficient enough to draw generalised conclusions regarding the gendered aspects of motivations.

Other considerations

Participants mentioned other types of motivations too, these however, were not shared by many. For instance, job security was essential for Darius and Flora: *'it's something constant in a sense that you're always employed, so there's no chance of you being redundant or made unemployed'*, Darius explained his choice to become a doctor. Flora, too, considered job availability in the media industry: '*I checked the possibilities too [...] how much opportunities there are in the film industry. Because you can go into so many directions… And there are a lot of opportunities.*'

Mina and Rosie voted for comfortable work environment and friendly, supportive colleagues as important job criteria:

> *'I have to feel comfortable that I'd fit into my job and my environment needs to be good [...] how the office is set out… if everything is organised, higher manager gives you the tasks to do… and the workload. [...] The people that work with me they should be like, friendly, I should get along with them pretty well.'* (Mina)
>
> '*in a good department, as in like the working area*. […] *You have to feel comfortable* […] *In the working place everyone should trust each other. [...] Getting along with them.'* (Rosie)

Reuben on the other hand, did not consider work environment and relationship with colleagues relevant criteria for a good job:

> *'I think it's nice to have a nice environment and good colleagues, however if those colleagues aren't nice to you, it doesn't matter as long as you're doing your job and you're staying professional, that's all they can look at. [...] because those work colleagues if they've been horrible, they're not paying at the end of the day. So if you just ignore their horribleness and carry on what you're doing, no one can touch you at the end of the day*.'

While these criteria were important to some participants, they did not seem to affect career decision making and aspirations at this stage of their transition to work.

Where do interests come from?

While participants' opinion on the importance of financial motivations varied, they all seemed to have aligned with the romantic illusio of work, and altruistic motivations were important to many, too. However, the choices made based on these fairly similar motivations differed

significantly. Aspirations varied not based on difference in motivations, but difference in interests. Contrary to the conception of 'interest' as a characteristic of the person, young people's biographical narratives revealed that 'interests' in fact, were born from experience. For example, Kurt wanted to become a paediatric nurse because he was hospitalised a lot as a child and was grateful for the support he received there from nurses:

> *'I experienced it as a patient and I think I just want to give back, I want to be that person to be able to help the patient... I know how thankful I felt as a patient getting the support from nurses and I would like to be that nurse.'*

When he changed his mind regarding his aspirations, he chose sports because he has been involved with judo all his life. Ezra also wanted to continue with his hobby, acting, on a professional level, as he had been attending drama classes since childhood. Others, too, had personal experience with the occupations they chose. Maria, who was completing an apprenticeship in childcare, had been taking care of her sisters' children for years:

> '*I was 15 when I started looking after him, so I thought it was good to know about his development, and support him. Also, my niece now is two, so I wanted to know how to support her, which is why I wanted to do this course, to know, to teach them and prepare them for school. […] My sisters are working, so I'm always babysitting them.'*

Many participants had family members with similar jobs to the one they were aspiring for: Aisha wanted to become a lawyer just like her late mother; Mina was interested in politics just like her father: *'My dad is a political analyst, so he knows a lot about it and he always talks to me so I've always been interested in politics',* and economics like her cousin:

> *'my cousin is an analyst, so in the bank. So I also like that, she's told me about her job and what she does, how she does it. […] I'd definitely ask her for her opinion, cause I've asked her for opinion she did politics and law, as I really do like these subjects.'*

Similarly, Hope's older brother worked in business administration at Microsoft; James' uncle was a personal trainer; and Rosie's boyfriend worked at the airport. It is quite likely that these relationships played a part in Hope wanting to work in business administration, James as a personal trainer, and Rosie as a flight assistant. Darius also explained that his interest in medicine *'mainly stemmed from the fact that my grandmother has dementia and like, yeah, I was considering… specialising in neurology.'* Clearly, the cultural capital available in their social networks was crucial in young people's career decision making.

Other participants became interested in specific subjects at school: for example, Flora in media and Greg in ICT. Importantly, both students emphasized the support they received specifically from their media and ICT teachers and the good relationship they had with them, underlining again the importance of social capital in aspiration formation. Many participants chose occupations they encountered through family and friends. However, schools can play important role in widening the horizons for action of young people by providing bridging social capital, which can be especially important to students whose personal social networks cannot provide information about and access to a variety of occupations, as in the case of Flora and Greg.

The two interviews with Reuben mapped the birth of his interest in clinical technology: although he had just started an apprenticeship in clinical technology on his mother's advice, Reuben did not seem interested in it at the first interview. However, by the second, he was planning to take up a position in the hospital after finishing his programme. His interest in clinical technology was born from active personal engagement and not a longstanding, hidden interest.

What horizons for action shape young people's aspirations?

The previous sections investigated the motivational factors participants discussed as the driving force behind their aspirations. While they tended to emphasize intrinsic motivations – such as the romantic and altruistic illusio of work – their biographies revealed that their aspirations were in fact embedded in personal experiences, moulded by the social and cultural capital they had at their disposal.

The following sections will further explore the structures, systems and beliefs that shaped - constrained and enabled - young people's aspirations, utilizing the concept of horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) defined the term as '*the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made*' (1997: 34), referring to both subjective and objective dimensions of opportunities. According to them, young people's decision-making is affected both by opportunity structures in the wider society, as well as their habitus, their beliefs on what is available in terms of jobs for them.

Financial constraints

Although few participants framed their aspiration motivations in terms of monetary rewards, financial considerations clearly played a significant role when defining educational and occupational aspirations.

Poverty was a recurring theme in James' narrative. He explained dropping out of college with the need to earn: '*I wasn't getting no money and I wanted to get money because, like, at home was like, I don't have a lot of money for clothes and that, so I had to look for something to do.'* However, with no qualifications or work experience, he could not secure any job. His tentative aspirations might be a result of the narrowing of his horizon for action.

Greg's life was also shaped by poverty:

> '*financially it's quite hard, especially for someone on benefits because my mum has three kids, you know, and no dad, so the money, it goes really quickly because everyone needs a bit, so it's hard sometimes.*'

Articulate and motivated, he would have liked to go to university but his financial situation did not allow that. Greg knew he needed tertiary qualifications to become a system administrator, therefore, as the next best option, he initially planned to complete a higher apprenticeship, as a compromise between his career aspirations and financial possibilities:

> *'I would go to university, no problem. I just don't like the thought of it, being 9000 a term to go to university for three years - that's a lot of money for me! And to pay that back, it just seems like too much for me, cause imagine if worse comes to worst and I didn't get the job after university I'd be in a lot of debt and I don't like the thought of that, you know. So an apprenticeship feels like a good thing cause you're earning and learning and it's preparing you for work later on and it gives you experience in the workplace.'*

Maria completed and achieved well in her A levels, but she had also ruled out higher education because the cost of university seemed unfeasible and too risky in her deprived circumstances: '*In year 11 I knew exactly I wasn't going to go to university because of the pay.'* Greg and Maria both experienced deep poverty, family breakdown and migration to another country for a better life, and these experiences seemed to have shaped their habitus, sensitising them to economic risks. Their cases seem to support Laughland-Booÿ et al.'s (2015) argument, that working-class young people are more wary of financial risks and thus, more reflexive regarding their aspirations than middle-class youth, due to their greater exposure to adversity.

However, as Bourdieu emphasized (2000), dispositions are subject to permanent revision, young people's habitus can change in relation to their position in the field. For instance, by the second interview, Greg was planning to go to university, overcoming his aversion to debt. In

the year between the interviews, his girlfriend became an apprentice and Greg realised that the apprenticeship route was not financially feasible for him because of the low pay.

In fact, all three apprentices from the study – Hope, Maria and Reuben, discussed apprenticeships in relation to university, comparing and contrasting the two pathways. The ever increasing cost of university and the high debt accrued by graduates was a leading motive in their decision-making, along with their desire to gain valuable work experience, hence opting for an apprenticeship (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018). While Hope and Reuben were keen to achieve higher qualifications in their chosen occupations later on, they preferred the apprenticeship or other vocational route. As mentioned earlier, the majority of participants were from working class background, many of them with significant exposure to adversity, which might explain their risk-aversion (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2015). These young people constructed their aspirations in relation to 'objective probabilities' (Bourdieu, 2000). This disposition however was not common among all participants. Others did not reflect on the wider social context and socio-economic constraints in their aspiration narratives, as the previous sections on motivations based on the romantic and altruistic illusio have shown.

Illness, disability and learning difficulties

The stories of Ezra, Evie and Kurt have all been marked by illness, disability or learning difficulties which affected their aspirations too. When Kurt decided to pursue sport science instead of nursing, his decision was affected, to some extent, by coming to terms with his disability, not only change of perspective about his main passion:

> *'I was a little bit concerned about nursing because although I didn't think it would affect me, there was always that little thing in the back of my mind that when it came to the practical side, what if there was something that I wasn't able to do? [...] I've got effectively the full use of only one arm.'*

Ezra's options for further education and work were also limited by his health and mental health conditions, because he had difficulties travelling alone on public transport. This effectively limited him to choices available in his local area. Also, perhaps related to his learning difficulties, Ezra found it difficult to search for jobs online, as the process seemed too complicated to navigate. Evie also reported having learning difficulties, and following her teachers' advice, she did not feel ready to study further than the level 2 childcare course she finished. Ill health, disability and learning difficulties have constrained these young people's

horizons for action through limiting their educational attainment and mobility, thus reducing the choices available to them in terms of aspirations.

Inadequate educational attainment

As explained in *Chapter 4. Methodology*, the main selection criteria for the study (and the larger RESL.eu project) was young people's theoretical risk of educational underachievement. Therefore all participants faced the challenge of negotiating potentially low qualifications. While some young people embarked on improving their qualifications to achieve their aspirations (as it will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), others negotiated educational constraints by redefining their aspirations. Darius, for example, wanted to become a doctor initially. However, he did not achieve sufficiently high grades at A levels, prompting him to re-evaluate his options. Although still trying to improve his grades, he decided to pursue optometry instead of medicine:

> *'I transitioned a bit more to optometry because I am working at an Opticians now. So it's a bit more convenient for me to do optometry because then I have that job and also I have a bit more leeway at getting an optometry job at the company itself. So that's the career path I'm considering going down as well.'*

Due to the longitudinal design, I was able to follow the changes in Darius' aspirations, and directly observe the process whereby he redefined them as a response to his changing horizons for action. However it is likely that this process happened earlier, before the study, for the majority of participants, and by the time I met them, they had already adjusted their aspirations to the 'objective probabilities' of their lives (Bourdieu, 2000). Adam remarked: '*I would love to have qualifications in history and geography and actually a better grade in maths instead of an E and, you know, but I can't see that happening*.' His aspirations, to work in horticulture than in construction, had been defined by the limitations of his low qualifications, together with other constraints in his life.

Other constraints

From all participants, perhaps Adam faced the greatest challenges: he grew up in care, with a string of foster parents, changing schools frequently, ending his compulsory education in a school for pupils with emotional and behavioural problems. In addition, Adam had a criminal record and was refused entry to a FE college to study horticulture because of this. His aspiration thus blocked, Adam was planning to work in construction when I met him the second time. Although Adam had clear aspirations and researched the available options, ultimately he was

unable to follow his ambition because of his criminal conviction, thus limiting the scope of his aspirations to unskilled work.

Rosie was also blocked from following her aspirations. She dreamed of becoming a flight assistant - at least, the first time I met her – but was pressured by her family to leave her Travel and Tourism course for undisclosed, but seemingly cultural reasons. She presented tentative aspirations at both interviews, and by the second, she gave up on her dream. Reaching 18, she was not eligible for free education anymore, so she decided to look for any available job.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how young people construct their aspirations and what factors impact on this process. It was found that participants emphasized motivational factors as the driving force behind their aspirations. Most participants agreed that emotional satisfaction derived from doing something enjoyable, something they are interested in was the most important criteria when defining aspirations. This seemingly commonsensical disposition was identified as the main illusio of work among participants, reflecting society-wide assumptions on what work means and how one is supposed to orient themselves towards their jobs. On the one hand, this romantic illusio of work seems to have provided some participants with sufficient drive to pursue their aspirations. On the other, aligning with this illusio might have negative consequences for others. For instance, it might be insufficient motivational force for some, especially when it comes to the less enjoyable aspects of an occupation or job search. It can also prematurely reduce young people' s options when searching for aspirations, narrowing down choices to already existing 'interests', and obscuring the actual process of interest formation and development, which is embedded in social networks and personal engagement with activities. The romantic illusio of work also enacts symbolic violence on occupations that are harder to frame in the language of love and joy, and the people doing these jobs.

Participants tended to regards 'interest' as an attribute, something that one naturally possesses from an early age. The interviews revealed however, that these grew from personal engagement with activities and people, 'interests' were deeply embedded in young people's biographies and shaped by the social and cultural capital at their disposal. The majority of participants seemed to have relied on familial sources of capital, while others found their interests at school/ training. It was argued that school can play a crucial role in providing students with subject knowledge, awareness about different occupations, but also bridging social capital through contact with teachers and other significant adults. This can be particularly important to young

people whose own social networks might be lacking in social and cultural capital that is advantageous in education and the labour market. In addition, sport and youth clubs, and other activities for young people can provide this function too.

Opinions differed on the significance of other motivational factors. While some participants mentioned financial motivations – usually in the form of wanting a career that provides a comfortable existence, others considered intrinsic motivations only. There was a tendency among participants to downplay or excuse the importance of financial considerations, although the majority came from working class families, several of them experiencing poverty and socio-economic hardship. Since young people connected this with emphasizing intrinsic motivations, their disregard for financial motives was interpreted as another effect of the romantic illusio of work, which seems to discredit other motivations. This approach however might encourage exploitative practices – such as using young people's voluntary work over an extended period, especially for more vulnerable young people, those making their first move into the labour market, with little economic capital and work experience to rely on.

Finally, this chapter examined how young people's horizons for action affected their aspirations. In this regards, poverty, low or inadequate educational attainment, health-related issues and learning difficulties, and having a criminal conviction were found to impact most on participants' educational and occupational aspirations, reducing the range of options available to them. The next chapter will explore the strategies employed by young people in their transition from compulsory education to the next steps in their lives.

CHAPTER 8. IMPLEMENTING ASPIRATIONS

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how young people constructed their aspirations, oscillating focus between their stated motivations and the opportunity structures of their lives. Participants tended to emphasize their motivations in aspiration construction - especially their interest in an occupation or field of studies. However, the analysis revealed that their 'choices' were formulated within their horizons for actions (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008): by pragmatic assessments of their educational and labour market chances and their perceptions of what is possible for them. In addition, it was shown that their 'interests' – which they tended to interpret as long-standing personal attributes - had grown from personal experiences deeply embedded into structural locations and shaped by the social and cultural capital they had access to through their social networks.

Chapter 8 continues to investigate young people's aspirations, focusing on the strategies employed to negotiate disadvantage and achieve their ambitions. The analysis is based on longitudinal data, as explained in *Chapter 4. Methodology* and the introduction to *Chapter 7. Constructing aspirations*. This chapter starts with investigating participants' perceptions about the process of transitioning from education to employments, exploring their beliefs on how aspirations can be achieved and what factors – individual actions, social structures and processes are important. My data suggests that these young Londoners, most of them coming from deprived backgrounds or facing other personal and/ or structural constraints, tend to have '*faith in the power of their own agency'* (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018:12). Many expressed their belief that with ambition and hard work anything is achievable, with only a few reflecting on structural constraints to success. Informed both by Bourdieu's capital theory (1985) and social capital theories developed by Coleman (1988), this chapter explores how participants, most of them marginalised in the education system and wider society, mobilized different types of capital, including economic, social and cultural capital, to negotiate and improve their disadvantaged position in the education field and labour market and achieve their aspirations. However, the volume and structure of capitals at their disposal was markedly different, as the analysis will show, with implications to their educational trajectories and transitions to employment. Participants ability to utilise resources that existed in their networks also varied. It was found that some of the most disadvantaged young people rejected the notion of asking for help from friends and family or relying in any way on others, drawing on the discourse of

personal agency, thus depriving themselves even of the thin social and cultural capital available in their social networks. Capital-theories (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman 1988) provide the analytical tools to explore the structural constraints and class inequalities while recognizing individual agency in mobilizing and utilizing various resources.

Perceptions on transitions

Participants' perceptions on aspirations, education and work have been explored in the previous chapters. In *Chapter 6. Defining aspirations* it was highlighted that participants interpreted the concept of aspirations in terms of educational and occupational objectives, in line with current policy discourses. Then, *Chapter 7. Constructing aspirations* explored, among others, participants' motivations for achieving their stated aspirations, and through these, their beliefs on acceptable attitudes towards work, drawing on the Bourdieusian concept of illusio (Bourdieu, 1984; 1985; 1990; 1998; 2000). The following sections will continue exploring the beliefs, attitudes and values that participants displayed during the interviews, specifically those related to aspirations and transitioning from school to work.

Commitment to positivity

Recent quantitative and qualitative studies conducted with young people in England (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018) have found that overall, they were optimistic regarding their future, either as a recognition of their privileged position, or, for the more disadvantaged, a positive conception of the future functioned as an 'anchor of hope' (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018:14).

Reuben, who was completing a hospital-based apprenticeship and was the only participant aspiring to become wealthy, seemed very optimistic about his future: '*Anyone can be rich and famous. […] Yes, even me. Anyone can.*' The majority however did not display such evidently optimistic dispositions towards the future. Several participants talked about their anxieties regarding their grades and not being accepted to their chosen courses: '*I'm worried what will happen in the future*', Flora said. Greg felt that his financial situation can easily jeopardise his education and future: '*I don't have the money to retake [failed exams]; and that is what I'm quite scared about cause if fail or if I make a mistake anywhere, that is basically it for my ICT career and… so it is quite scary.*' Others expressed doubts about achieving their aspirations: '*that's where I'd like to be, but that's not where I think I'm going to be',* James remarked. As explained, all participants had experienced educational failure and/or socio-economic hardship, which likely influenced their attitudes towards the future. From their marginalised position,

they seemed to adopt a '*positive outlook*' (Kurt) and put their faith in the transformative power of high aspirations and hard work as a means to counter disadvantage and the constraints of their lives. This is in line with the findings of Franceschelli and Keating, (2018), who argued that the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) displayed by disadvantaged youth was '*more of a coping strategy than an article of faith'* (Franceschelli and Keating, (2018: 12). Rather than optimistic, they seemed hopeful, as the following exchange with Mina illustrates:

> *Mina:* *You need to be confident that you will do well. Should have confidence. Also, you need to have ambition that you are gonna do well. These are the main things. As long as you have sound belief, you will do, I believe, you're gonna achieve. If you don't have sound belief in that and confidence you're gonna be like 'I'm gonna fail anyway'. It's possibly the case that you might fail cause you don't actually put as much effort as you would when you say 'I can do this' and you do that. So a positive mindset.*
>
> *Magda:* *Do you have that?*
>
> *Mina:* *... Yeah... Yeah, I do, but sometime I'd say 'I probably won't even get it'. But I tend to say 'No, I can do it and I try to do it'. [...]*
>
> *Magda:* *Are you fairly positive about your own future?*
>
> *Mina:* *Yeah, if I do well, hopefully, definitely.*

This quote suggests that Mina has accepted the idea that a positive attitude is the most important ingredient of success – in general. However, she seems to be in the process of adopting this commitment to positivity to her own situation. She *wants to be* optimistic and *wants to believe* that positive attitude will bring success *for her*, however, she struggles with adopting it full-heartedly, as the pauses in her reply, the conditional phrasing and her expressed doubts are demonstrating.

Commitment to positivity in face of adversity seemed to define Evie's stance too. At the time, she had been volunteering at two nurseries, hoping to get an employment offer as a result, or at least improve her employability. She left education with a Level 2 qualification (officially equivalent to 5 GCSEs at A*-C) and did not intend to study further, for the time. She had learning difficulties and hoped to gain confidence in her field through work. However, she

struggled with job interviews, she complained of getting '*nervous*' and '*confused*' with questions asked in a different way as she expected:

> *'When I'm in the interviews sometimes [...] I don't understand the question that they ask me cause they ask it in different ways and then I don't understand what they're trying to ask me. Then I just go silent and not able to answer the question.'*

When asked about the challenges in her life, Evie replied with declaring her commitment to positivity: to not giving up and trying to see failed interviews as learning opportunities – phrased in the second person, almost like a mantra repeated to herself:

> '*I think it's important that no matter how hard it is to get work you just have to keep applying, every interview is a practice, every application is a practice, and if you keep doing it and doing it and doing it, it will just become natural to you, you won't get as nervous and know what they expect from you and eventually the right job will come along.'*

As the quotes illustrate, optimism and a positive attitude was more of an aspiration for some participants, adopted to counter adversity.

Belief in ambition and hard work

In participants' narratives about the future, commitment to positivity was frequently mediated by a belief in effort, hard work, as the previous quotes from Mina and Evie indicate. For example, Reuben said: '*Anyone can be rich and famous, it's just about the effort.'* While other participants seemed more modest regarding '*the transformative power of hard work'* (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018:1), several of them believed that putting effort and hard work into studies and job-search was the best way to succeed: '*you just need to study and then that's all you need in life it's nothing more than that',* Flora declared. She also seemed convinced, just like Reuben, that this will guarantee success:

> *Flora:* *It's not irrelevant what your attitude to work is: if one doesn't want to work then they won't find a good job. But if someone really wants to realise a good life, a good place to live, and so on, I think, it will happen.*
>
> *Magda:* *What do you need to do to achieve that? You said you need to work hard, you need the right attitude…*
>
> *Flora:* *Yes.*

Magda: *Is this enough?*

Flora: *Well, I think it is.*

Consequently, when asked about their strategies to achieve their aspirations, virtually all participants answered with variations on putting effort into studies, working hard:

> *'So now I study as much as I can so I can get into a university and can secure a job as good as possible for myself. Then I won't have to worry about the economic situation.'* (Flora)
>
> *'Working hard. That's all really, isn't it?... Just working hard.'* (Hugh)
>
> *'First I want to, like, work my butt off for maths and English.'* (Rosie)

There is growing evidence that attitudes on what matters for educational and labour market success are changing. While previous studies found the valuing of 'effortless achievement' (Archer and Francis, 2007; Jackson, 2006), today's youth seem to believe in the idea that anything is achievable with hard work, regardless of their class background, age or gender (Mendick et al., 2015; Franceschelli and Keating, 2018).

This '*strong investment in the ethics and ideals of working hard'* (Mendick et al., 2015: 174) seems to emerge as a new *illusio* in the fields of education and work. The shift to this ethos has clear positive implications for young people's future planning strategies: providing hope, presenting any and all high aspirations as achievable and encouraging hard work. However, the exclusive focus on young people's own agency, while empowering, obscures structural inequalities, thus failing to provide them with adequate tools and strategies to negotiate and overcome the constraints of their positions. The discourse on hard work is embedded into neoliberal conceptions of meritocracy (Mendick et al., 2015) where agents have equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their background. Consequently, if success in education and the labour market is solely determined by individual effort, failure becomes a result of personal pathologies only, of not working hard enough, instead of being shaped by social inequalities (Tyler, 2013). Academic under-attainment, unemployment and being NEET are thus interpreted in terms of individual failure, putting the responsibility solely on the shoulders of the young people.

Emphasizing personal agency

Participants tended to describe their educational trajectories and career decision-making through individualised narratives of choice, success and failure; as noted elsewhere (Pless, 2014). They were keen to present themselves as autonomous agents in their own lives: *'at the end of the day it's going to be down to me to find a way'* (Kurt), '*I just decided to take it into my own hands and look for what I wanted to do and that's how I came up with this option'* (Greg). All participants agreed that career choice is an individual act: '*you should shape your own way'*, Mina said.

When prompted about the role of significant others, participants emphasized their own agency: '*even though there's parents influence […] it should be the child's own decision to do what, how they wanna do in a sense, it's their own life so they should decide what they wanna do'* (Darius). Even those participants whose choices and educational trajectories were clearly shaped by parental influence (as it will be discussed in later sections) tended to downplay the amount of support received. For instance, Aisha who had a private tutor said: '*I really don't think I need a lot of support'*. Reuben, whose council officer mother was a source of practical educational help, emotional support, advice and information about education and training programmes, only mentioned his mother's role when I directly asked him about:

Magda: *Why did you choose this specific one [apprenticeship]? […]*

Reuben: *To be honest, this is the only apprenticeship that I saw that was being advertised. I didn't see any other apprenticeships and I thought, because I was born at this hospital, I would go for it as well.*

Magda: *Did you talk to your parents, for example, about this choice?*

Reuben: *Yes, I talked to my mum and she said for me to go for it and I went for it.*

Magda: *Did you find out first or your mum found out first about this apprenticeship?*

Reuben: *My mum. […]*

Magda: *Did she advise you to try it out and come?*

Reuben: *Yes.*

Presenting themselves as autonomous individuals and emphasizing their own agency in career decision-making was a common theme across the interviews. These narratives were shaped by contemporary ideologies of individualisation (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Giddens, 1991) and they did not necessarily reflect reliably the amount of support and advice that shaped participants' aspirations and trajectories.

However, participants' investment in individualistic perspectives did not manifest only at the level of narratives, but seemed to had impacted on their decisions and strategies of dealing with adversity too. As described in *Chapter 5*, Kurt dropped out of a FE programme due to depression, disability and illness. When talking about this period, he praised himself on overcoming difficulties on his own, without seeking any support:

> *'I never spoke to a doctor about it so I did it all on my own back as well, no medication or counsellors or stuff like that… So yeah, I'm just quite a strong-willed person and that's in everything. […] I think there's only so much support someone can give you without you wanting to help yourself. […] I think it was 80% my job to get myself better.'*

There seemed to be a marked difference in participants' stance about seeking and accepting support. While some seemed comfortable discussing the support they received and the social and cultural capital they utilized from their networks (discussed in subsequent sections), others outright refused looking for support, as this would have jeopardized their agency. Hugh said: *'I don't like relying on people… Yeah, I don't know really. I'm one of them ones that just keep myself to myself, like if I have something, a problem, I sort that out myself.' (Hugh)*

While the sample from this study is too small to reach overarching conclusions, it seemed however, that those in more need of support – such as Kurt who had serious health conditions and life-limiting disability, and Hugh, a NEET with no qualifications, who just a few months before the first interview was stabbed repeatedly in his neighbourhood – were the most reluctant to seek out support and less able to take advantage of the resources available in their networks. It is difficult to assess the extent to which statements on rejecting support are shaped by role performance, a desire to present themselves as autonomous agents (Goffman, 1959), on the one hand, and are reflections of actual strategies, on the other. However, these narratives indicate the valuing of individual solutions to adversity. Trying to adhere to the ideal of a self-reliant and independent individual might stigmatise and hinder strategies that rely on utilizing economic, social and cultural capital accessible through family, friends and other institutions. For instance, although Hugh's social networks seemed quite poor in education and

employment-related capital, he did have access to on-to-one advice from a local council officer. But for some reason, he did not seem to engage with these, or act upon the advice provided. Kurt, on the other hand, admitted that acknowledging his depression and seeking emotional support from friends eventually, did have a positive impact: *'I realised that I did have to admit it and I told a lot more people and that's what really helped me get back on to my feet, once people knew.*'

Awareness of structural constraints

As discussed earlier in this chapter, young people seem to have adopted the individualistic and meritocratic discourse according to which those who have a positive attitude and work hard will reach their goals, regardless of their background, exemplified by a quote from Kurt:

> *'If you have strong enough inner strength and believe in yourself, nothing can stop you. There are impacts around you that can get in your way, but bottom line, if you have the inner strength and belief, personally, and hunger to get where you want to be, then I don't think there's anything that can stop you. You find a way to climb the wall, essentially.'*

Only a few participants mentioned structural constraints as obstacles to realising their aspirations. However, as discussed in *Chapter 7. Constructing aspirations*, their aspirations were often formulated within their horizons for action, they were aiming for educational options and occupations they deemed achievable. For example, some chose an apprenticeship because they could not afford going to university. In their narratives, there seemed to be a disconnect between the compromises they had to make due to their socio-economic disadvantage when defining their aspirations, and their stated belief in meritocratic and individualistic ideologies. As mentioned earlier, these beliefs seem to function as an illusio of work, a taken for granted truth, the validity of which is not questioned.

When asked about the challenges faced by young people in London in general, participants listed various socio-economic problems, including poverty, crime, gangs:

> *'Poverty is one, drugs is one, gangs, so many things in London. Just... it's hard.* […] *People… they have no money, their parents have no money, so they go out, they sell drugs, they do things like that. And then it puts them on the wrong road for life. Then they end up in prison or no job in the future because they leave school.'* (Hugh)

However, as in the example above, these issues were formulated in the third person and participants often denied that these had impact on their own lives. In addition, the narratives about challenges in London, in general and their own strategies to achieve their aspirations did not seem to connected. Most participants tended to interpret the challenges they faced, their difficult, non-linear transition from education to employment and their precarious position in terms of personal responsibility. Thus they were inclined to describe individualistic responses, such as working/ studying harder and having a positive attitude. Even those who faced serious existential challenges, such as Adam, Ezra, Kurt and Hugh, for example, tended to interpret them in individual terms, struggling to come up with effective coping strategies. Many of them seemed reluctant to consult their families, friends and larger social networks to ask for help when dealing with mental health issues, the difficulties of finding a job or returning to education. Similar to Pless' (2014) findings, very few articulated direct criticism of the education system and other social institutions in which they occupied very marginalised positions.

Only Adam and Greg connected social inequalities and constraints with their own trajectories in education and the labour market, formulating conscious criticism of the care and education system, respectively. Adam explained that:

> *In a normal family situation, your parents will teach you everything from going to the shops or going to do a job, benefits, […] and making you aware of paying bills and everything like that; whereas in the care home, everything is done for you. You don't need to worry about anything and then you find out and you're like, "now what do I do?"*'

Instead of preparing young people in care for independent living, care and foster homes, according to Adam, are *'more interested in just sort of ticking the boxes and dotting the I's'.* He criticised the lack of emotional support in care:

> '*a lot of times you don't get listened to in the care system. […] When your whole world's turning upside down and you don't know when you're next going to see your parents, you don't know when you're next going to see your family and then you've got other problems to deal with, it's nice to have someone there you can scream and shout at but you know they're actually there just to listen. And that's the problem in the care home, especially the one I was in, there is just no-one to listen to you. […] And if you get stressed at school or you don't find school particularly the best, which most care*

> *leavers don't, they've never found school the best because they've been moved around so many times, there's a point where you need someone just to talk to and there isn't that service.'*

Adam was well aware that these institutional problems were shaped by macro-level policy changes, specifically funding cuts:

> *'[The care system] don't have the time, they don't have the resources, they don't have the money and they don't have the support from the higher authorities [...]. And that is the big problem that they need the funding for training the people that want to become foster carers, and there isn't that funding. [...] The government keeps cutting the funding and the more it gets cut the worse services are getting.*'

Similarly, Greg was also highly critical of funding cuts in education (the brunt of which were happening during the lifetime of the study, as discussed in Chapter 2): '*these educational cuts really not helping at the moment. [...] I think more money put into education from the government would help people like me a lot.*' Although Greg described a well thought-through educational strategy to achieve his aspiration, he felt that the constant political meddling in the education system can easily jeopardise his future:

> *'This has been my second chance coming to this college and now they're starting to change the rules and if I fail because of them changed the rules, what am I supposed to do, you know? They don't give me options, nothing, so it is scary.'*

He also reflected briefly on the disconnect between the macro and micro-level issues in young people's narratives, the reason why structural problems are interpreted in individualised terms: '*we don't really think about what we <u>need</u> too much, because we're too focused on what we <u>have to do</u>.'* This quote reflects the shifting perspective from structural-systemic issues to individual responsibility and the neoliberal withdrawal of the welfare state (Wright, 2012).

Negotiating disadvantaged positions to achieve aspirations

As explained in detail in *Chapter 1: Introduction*, this study focused on young people who were identified as being at a theoretical risk of educational underachievement (a research focus and sampling criteria 'inherited' from the larger RESL.eu project). Thus, by research design, all participants experienced socio-economic, personal and/ or institutional risk factors that increased their likelihood of leaving education with low or no qualifications (Ferguson et al.,

2005), thus making them particularly vulnerable to experience unemployment and periods of being NEET (Bynner, 2001; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Rumberger, 1987, 2011).

One risk factor - (potentially) low educational attainment – was shared among all. In addition, participants' biographies included (as detailed in *Chapter 5*) struggles with poverty (Adam, Greg, James, Maria), conflict with family members (Flora, Rosie) and family breakdown (Greg, James, Maria). More than half of participants lived in single parent households, with no or very little contact with their fathers (Darius, Greg, Hope, Hugh, James, Kurt, Maria, Reuben). Adding to family-related traumas – which were often recalled during the interviews, Aisha lost her mother as child, and Adam grew up in the care system, having no relationship with his parents. Several participants' educational trajectory was marred by physical illness, disability and mental health conditions (Ezra and Kurt), while other were obstructed by learning difficulties (Evie and Ezra). Many of them talked about being bullied in school (Adam, Flora, Kurt, Maria, Rosie), others had difficulties with 'fitting in' (Darius, James). School-related problems were very common: changing school in search of a more supportive learning environment (Aisha, Darius, Greg, Mina), dropping out of school/ college (Greg, Kurt, Hugh, James, Ezra) and being excluded due to behavioural issues (Adam, James). Some of the problems these young people encountered seemed almost insurmountable, for instance, Adam was unable to secure a job or enrol to college because having a criminal record; while Hugh was stabbed while out in his neighbourhood, with his assailant never caught.

These themes – specific risk factors and structures of constraints – have emerged from the interview data, as participants talked at length about their struggles. However, they rarely identified these as impediments to their academic achievement and labour market transition, as discussed earlier. Instead, young people were keen to present themselves as active agents of their own lives, emphasizing their own agency. Nonetheless, their narratives revealed that young people drew not only on 'individual resources of ability and ambition' (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007: 108-9), as they tended to stress, but utilized, to varying extent, the economic, social and cultural capital available in their social networks - including their family, teachers and other school staff, friendships and peers, religious, sport and community organizations - to strengthen their position and achieve their goals.

The following sections will investigate how participants negotiated their disadvantaged position in education and/or on the youth job market, and the resources they used during this time to overcome limitations.

Raising academic attainment through using capitals

When describing their educational and career choices and strategies young people tended to emphasize their own agency and describe themselves as the main protagonist in their decision-making process. Nonetheless, it was apparent that parents and other family members played a significant role in young people's aspirations, providing differentiated support – including emotional, practical, informational and economic support, as discussed by Ryan and colleagues (2019).

Economic capital

As explained earlier, almost all participants had working-class, low socio-economic background, the exception being Aisha, from a wealthy and highly educated Nigerian family. As explained in *Chapter 5*, she arrived late into the English education system and did not achieve sufficiently high GCSE results. As a sixth form student in the spring of 2014, Aisha was identified as being at risk of educational under-attainment through the RESL.eu school survey. However, her family was able to deploy substantial economic capital to raise her attainment. Aisha's father paid for a lesson tutor, then, after an unsuccessful year in public education, sent Aisha to a private tuition college. There, she had improved some of her GCSEs, while simultaneously preparing for her A levels examinations, which had suffered as a result. Feeling insecure about her grades, Aisha completed a foundation course at her chosen university – paying international fees - before applying to study law there. She received the university acceptance letter on the day of the second interview.

Aisha achieved her educational aspiration of studying law at a good university. However, her success story hides a complex educational trajectory and significant investment – economic, emotional, effort and time. Reflecting back at her educational trajectory, Aisha remarked that perhaps she did not receive the best advice on the choices available to her:

> '*I would change a lot, to be honest. […] I would have went from like [secondary school] straight to foundation year, because when I went to the foundation year, all they required was my GCSE and BTEC results, which I've already done in [secondary school] […] I would have saved a lot of money and time.*'

Although she discussed these options with her older siblings and father, neither of them were familiar with the English education system: '*when I moved here, you know, like when you move from your country, there's literally less information.'* She followed the school career adviser's recommendation to improve her GCSEs and do A levels, but this, in her case, might not have

been the best advice. Nonetheless, she was in a privileged position, being able to utilise her family's considerable economic capital and convert it into academic credentials, a strategy not available to any of the other participants.

Mina's story showed similarities with Aisha's. Her family was originally from Iraq, and they lived in the Netherlands before arriving in London when Mina was in secondary school. Lacking the specific cultural capital of understanding the English education system and school rankings, Mina started at a school which was in the process of closing down. With little support at school and a narrow subject provision, she failed the first year of her A levels.

Social and cultural capital

Although Mina did not have access to economic capital like Aisha, she seemed adept at developing and utilising social and cultural capital. She quickly built friendships at school, and sought out an Arabic Saturday school to teach there, thus improve her CV, gain new friends and grow her social networks. Realising that at her failing school she will not achieve the grades necessary to study law or politics at university, Mina identified a better performing school through a friend:

> '*I heard from my friend. She was coming here, too. And she told me, "oh, let's check this school out". So when I came here, I saw the layout of the school, I saw how the teachers were, so I was really impressed then I said, "yeah, I should try and come into this school".*'

Just like Aisha, Mina 'lost' a year, as she decided to retake her failed exams. However, with better support and more suitable subject provision, Mina's grades improved significantly and eventually she was accepted to study law at a good university.

Although a newly arrived migrant, Mina successfully built friendships with a diverse range of young people at both secondary schools and the Arabic school. Then, she was able to use these bonding ties to bridge out into a new school and secure various extra-curricular activities and work experiences (Holland, Reynolds and Weller, 2007). Although lacking economic capital, Mina's family seemed rich in cultural capital. As mentioned in Chapter 7, Mina's father was a political analyst and she became interested in politics through him. He was Mina's role model and fully supportive of her studies:

> *'Cause he's achieved a lot, he's very intelligent, he reads a lot of books, he has a lot of information. Sometimes we will sit down to the TV and you know these shows [...] they*

ask you a question and you have to answer it. He always knows the answers! […] He gives you advice so that's why I look up to him because he always holds me, he is always by my side.'

Mina had cousins in London who went to top universities and provided her with valuable information about the English education system and their jobs, as described in Chapter 7. Mina expertly utilised these connections: '*My the first point of contact would be my cousin. […] I'd definitely ask her for her opinion.'*

Aisha and Mina had high aspirations and were able to successfully negotiate their low academic achievement, and convert the significant capitals at their disposal into academic credentials. Although Mina's family lacked economic capital, both girls seemed to have middle class habitus and access to role models and occupational knowledge in their family networks that helped forming and achieving their high educational aspirations (the study was not long enough to see their occupational achievement) (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Consistent with previous findings on 'ethnic capitals' (Modood, 2004; Modood and Khattab, 2016) and the 'immigrant paradigm' (Kao and Thompson, 2003; Strand, 2014), although both girls achieved lower in secondary school, they still formulated higher educational goals – also consistent with their middle class habitus and cultural capital, and managed to get into HE.

Another migrant girl, Flora, formulated higher aspirations than her previous academic achievement and class position would have suggested. Flora too, arrived into the English education system during the secondary years and struggled initially. The RESL.eu survey identified her as having one of the lowest school engagement and social support levels in her school year. When she arrived at 13, Flora was bullied in school and found solace among other Hungarians:

'*I was the only Hungarian in the school. And then this one Hungarian girl came along, so we just became friends because we were Hungarians. So, and then she got her friend circle with all other people, so I got introduced to that circle. And I think it was the wrong choice to be involved with those people*.'

Flora's bonding ties with her co-ethnic friends had a negative effect on her education:

'*They just didn't really care about anything. They were just reckless, I guess, and they were a bad influence on me. […]I was always stressed about them, so that made me not focus on my studies as much as I should have.*'

As a result, her relationship with her mother deteriorated, while her father was still working in Hungary, preparing to join the family in London. Unlike Mina, Flora did not exhibit a middle class habitus, coming from a clearly working class family. She did not seek out bridging ties through ethnic organisations as Mina did, instead relied on bonding friendships with her co-ethnics. However, at some point during secondary school, Flora recognised that her friendship network had a negative influence on her: '*I had enough. I mean, they treated me really badly even though I was always the nicest one, I was always there for them. So I just said one day that it's enough, I'm out, I don't want to do this anymore*.' She cut ties with them and successfully developed new friendships in school, while her relationship with her parents also improved. Flora achieved good results in GCSEs and A levels, and got accepted to study media, as she intended, at her choice of university.

Flora's story demonstrates the potentially negative impact of social capital, specifically bonding ties within homogeneous friendship groups that help to 'get by' in life but do not necessarily enable to 'get ahead' (Putnam, 2000). However, Flora was able to break these ties and bridge out into new relationships first at school, then at university. She also developed good relationship with teachers, especially her media teacher that helped her secure media-related work experience, study harder and achieve her educational aspirations (discussed by Ryan et al., 2019). She might have also benefited from 'ethnic capital' (Modood, 2004; Modood and Khattab, 2016): the high aspirations of her working class parents and their strong enforcement of values and norms that promoted educational engagement. For instance, her parents seemed to had been instrumental in distancing Flora from her destructive friendships. They had high standards regarding friends: *'they still think they are not as good as they should be',* Flora explained, when already at university.

Also, her educational trajectory and relationship with parents seems consistent with the 'immigrant paradigm' (Kao and Thompson, 2003; Strand, 2014), according to which immigrants who lack financial capital might invest more into education than the native populations, because they see it as a route to upward social mobility. Flora felt well supported by her parents - '*They understand me and support me wholly […] They say that I can do it'* – and she felt compelled to make them proud with her educational achievement: '*they are definitely proud of me for making it so far'*, Flora said.

Greg's story showed similarities with Flora's. Although a White English boy, as a child, he moved to Spain with his family, then returned to London when he was 15. While in Spain, he

had strong bonding ties with the local English community. Leaving school with no qualifications, he recognized that he was on a route to unemployment and poverty, just like her close family and friends:

> *'I just didn't want that so just decided to come here and make something out of myself, you know, just wanted something better than what I saw my older friends were going through. Because I had a lot of friends, most were like around my age but I had some that were like 20, 25, 30, and some of them were DJs, that never worked out. So they just, they stay on friends' sofas, […] or builders, and they struggle to live and I didn't want to do that, I didn't see that for myself, so I just decided to come here.'*

Greg explained that he convinced his mother to move back to Britain specifically to be able to return to education, an option that did not seem to exist in Spain: '*So it was either be a gardener or come to England and start all over again.'* Not only was he able to break out from his strong bonding friendships, but managed to convert his negative experiences into educationally beneficial cultural capital, looking at his friends and family as 'negative role models' and learning what 'not' to do:

> '*That is what motivated me really, my parents because they… well, they didn't do very well in life.[…] They didn't get any qualifications when they were growing up, so their bad examples has shown me a good example and motivated me into becoming what I am today basically.'*

Just like Flora, Greg also developed new friendships at the FE college in London, met his girlfriend there and bridged into useful contacts with his teachers. As a result of these, he secured work experience at an IT company and at the college library. Having a good relationship with his ICT teacher also enabled him to obtain information, practical advice and support regarding his educational choices and opportunities, that was otherwise lacking in his social networks: '*my ICT teacher, cause he is probably the only person I would go to if it's anything related to the future.'*

Cultural capital and understanding the 'game'

While the young people discussed so far in this section tried to raise their academic attainment through improving their grades and focusing on their studies, Darius followed a different strategy. He wanted to study medicine at university, a very competitive subject, so he put significant effort into improving his chances of getting accepted. He, too, changed school

earlier in his educational trajectory, and left a competitive, high performance school for a more supportive one. Subsequently, his grades improved. Initially, he felt the new school provided sufficient support and information to him to help achieving his aspiration. *'[My priority is] studying for my exams mostly cause that's what I need to go to move on to medicine',* he explained.

In addition to studying hard, Darius sought out other secondary school students aiming for medical school, as well as medical students on the internet, through social media. Plus, he used the opportunities offered at his school, such as meeting alumni and other university students. Darius did not have access to 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about medicine and HE through his informal social networks, so he put considerable effort into getting insider information and understanding 'the game' (in a Bourdieusian sense).

Indeed, through his new connections, Darius realised that he needs work experience in the field to distinguish himself. Therefore he put all his effort into ticking this box as well:

> *'I've done one at King's College Hospital [...], it was dental medicine so I got to observe tooth extractions and jaw replacements and stuff. [...] Another one was at Chelsea Westminster Hospital that was [...] plastic surgery, so skin, skin grafts and stuff like that. What else? The one at Royal Free hospital which is just a renal clinic and just observing junior doctors how they go about their daily business and... I've done one at St George's I think, that was the neurosurgery one; and I think I've done work experience at King's College that was a diabetes research one.'*

Darius also seemed skilled in strategic networking. He pro-actively sought out all these positions on his own:

> *'I sort of went online and then Googled doctor's phone and emails and I just emailed a bunch of doctors. [..] I got a reply from each of them but most of them, well, 90% of them were no and only about 5% were yes, so I only got about five yeses out of about, I don't know, more than a hundred, I think.'*

However, at A levels, Darius did not achieve sufficiently high grades. He realised he spent too much time on extracurriculars instead of concentrating on his studies. During his last year in school, he undertook further volunteering: at a care home and at a pharmacy, for 10 and 3 months respectively, still to improve his CV:

> ‘*I was doing a bit too much because I was volunteering every week, I believe. So I could have lessened that and left that for when I had my holidays, rather than doing that every week and getting distracted as well’*, he reflected.

At the first interview, he praised the support he received from his school and teachers. However, he became more critical of his secondary school by the second interview. Darius felt his teachers did not give him adequate advice in terms of priorities. His opinion about switching secondary schools has also changed: while still thinking that he needed a change before the GCSEs, he thought he would have been better off doing his A levels at the more prestigious school, which had better contacts with elite universities and had more students preparing for similar studies:

> ‘*There were more people who wanted to do scientifically-orientated degrees rather than my school which was more sort of creative arts, engineering based [...] and a bit more sports as well. [...] There was about three people out of a whole year group that probably wanted to do a scientifically orientated degree.*’

While Darius found it easy to talk to his mother about his educational and career plans, his mother was not able to give him advice on these topics: as a migrant, she did not know the British education system and has never been to university. There were no doctors in his family, and neither of his aunts went to school in the UK. Regarding educational and career choices, Darius relied on the advice of teachers and school friends, work colleagues and contacts from universities he found online. It seems, Darius felt undermined when comparing his extracurricular engagement with other prospective medical students. In his eagerness to catch up with them, he seems to have neglected his studies, which thwarted his dream of becoming a doctor.

Gaining competitive advantage through investing in employability

While young people discussed in the previous section utilised different resources, their strategies were similar: they all invested into improving their academic attainment and qualifications, because they viewed education as the best route to a good job and comfortable life later on. Others chose different strategies, as discussed in this section.

Apprenticeships

Some participants, Hope, Maria and Reuben, embarked on apprenticeship programmes. However, all three were doing a course at the same or lower level than their existing qualifications. Maria and Reuben had already achieved Level 3 (A level equivalent)

qualifications with good grades: Maria attained Level 3 BTEC qualifications in sixth form, then started a Level 2 Childcare qualification in college; while Reuben had finished Level 3 Health and Social Care before. Both were enrolled on Level 3 apprenticeship courses. Hope achieved good GCSE qualifications, nonetheless she started a Level 2 apprenticeship (equivalent to her GCSEs). Although these programmes will not improve their qualifications levels, these young people were convinced that, through gaining valuable work experience, apprenticeships will provide better employment opportunities later on (see Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 7, apprenticeships were seen as an alternative to university, a practical solution to improve employability prospects without the high cost of HE, as expressed by Maria: '*I heard many people saying that university is not the only option you can get the skills. […] So, I said it's better to do a course which, in the end, I can get a job.'*

As this quote illustrates, the choice for apprenticeships was mediated by the social and cultural capitals available in participants family and friendship networks. While going to university was promoted by schools and colleges, career advisors and parents; at the time of the study, apprenticeships were not included in discourses about high aspirations. Both Hope and Maria were actively discouraged from this route at school[46]:

> '*in my school, they pushed me to go to sixth form, and I didn't want to. I say, okay, I'll do my Level 3s so that this will be a backup if the apprenticeship later on is not working, I can still have my UCAS points to go to university later on.*' (Maria)

Instead, participants found out about apprenticeships through informal networks. Hope, a Jehovah's Witness, explained that she had older friends at the Kingdom Hall and they advised her about education and training options:

> '*they always said apprenticeships kind of the way forward. Because they said that they've seen people go to uni and they come out with kind of no knowledge and no experience of how to work, and that employers would want someone who'd had the experience.*'

Just like Greg, Hope attributed her mature career decision-making to having access to older friends and learning from their experiences: '*I was able to see from other people within that*

[46] According to Maria, she was told in school that it is not possible to progress to university from apprenticeships, only A levels and FE college courses, which is incorrect. Several other apprentices from the larger RESL.eu study also reported being given this information at different schools.

organisation what I should do in the future, so I think that was a really good help.' Participants often seemed to accept more readily 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) – experience-based information from friends and family, than formal, factual advice from professionals. After finding out about apprenticeships from friends, Hope came across a promising Business Administration programme at a job fair, then switched from her college course to it. Although this apprenticeship previously won local awards and was affiliated with two FE colleges, after working there for half a year, Hope realized that the company in fact was exploiting the work of young people with already existing skills, without providing any further training for them, in breach of their contract. Hope tried to seek support from the college, in vain. In the end, she dropped out of the course and looked for another apprenticeship.

Hope's apprentice trajectory illustrates the difficulties young people encounter when embarking on an alternative educational option. The literature is ambivalent regarding apprenticeships is England: while they have great potential to provide useful training for young people, there are also concerns about the poor quality of provision and exploitative practices at many programmes (Hogarth et al., 2012; Ryan P, 2011). Although Hope proactively used the social and cultural capital at her disposal – she talked to family and friends regarding her career choices and consulted staff members at the FE college, she still did not have the means to gauge the actual quality of a new provision. As a result, two years after getting good GCSE results, she still had the same level of qualification, although she was training/ studying full time all along. Her story is a reminder that agency alone is not sufficient to overcome structural and institutional limitations.

Although Maria's childcare apprenticeship provided good quality training, her experiences, too were shaped by social inequalities. Maria came from a poor migrant family; her mother brought up four daughters on her own, working illegally in Britain for years, as described in Chapter 5. Even after growing up, the sisters stayed close together, forming a family economy with everyone contributing. Maria's role was taking care of the two older sisters' children while they were working – which then motivated her to study childcare. While Hope's apprenticeship was company-led, with the FE college being loosely associated with it; Maria's programme was organized by a college, with the apprentices having to secure their own training places at different nurseries. Her family being in desperate need of money, Maria accepted an apprentice position at the first nursery she found. Later she realized that all other apprentices on her programme had better salaries: not being so constrained financially, they were able to wait longer, search for better options and negotiate higher pay. Maria also remarked that as an

apprentice, she receives a fraction of adult payment, £3.30 per hour, the minimum pay at the time, while doing the same job: '*I do the same job as everyone else, so it's not fair'*, she said.

From these three, Reuben's programme seemed the most likely to lead to employment. It was set up by a London hospital, specifically to train young people for shortage occupations. Indeed, Reuben was offered a position there after finishing. Similarly to Hope and Maria, Reuben found out about this apprenticeship through informal channels. However, unlike the two girls', Reuben's social networks were rich in education-related cultural capital as his mother worked at the local council's education, employment and skills department and was professionally involved with promoting apprenticeships. As such, she was well positioned - unlike Hope – to help Reuben making an informed choice about apprenticeship courses.

The three apprentices from the study present a very small sample to draw conclusions. However, even such a small sample revealed the complexity of making informed choices in education, especially about less established options. Since apprenticeships did not have a central database, with providers reliably described there, young people were left on their own devices. Thus, those with access to relevant social and cultural capital through their informal networks were better positioned to access good quality apprenticeships. Lack of economic capital also narrowed down choices, as in Maria's case.

Pre-employment programmes

As explained earlier, all three apprentices had already achieved Level 2 and 3 qualifications prior to starting the apprenticeships. Although apprenticeships are often promoted as training opportunities for low-achieving young people (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch, 2010) and '*a social inclusion route for the disadvantaged*' (Keep, 2015:473), as discussed in *Chapter 2*, those with low qualifications might have problems accessing them, especially good quality provision, if they have to compete with young people with higher qualifications.

Indeed, Hugh and James, with no qualifications, had both tried applying to apprenticeships, without any success: '*I tried to apply for a lot of them but nothing came up, because a lot of them are Level 2 and my qualifications only are Level 1 and so I couldn't get a Level 2',* James explained. Instead, James started a programme organised by a local council specifically for young people NEET. The course offered unpaid volunteer placements to gain work experience and job search advice. James found out about it from a friend who was already attending.

Rosie attended the same NEET programme and she found it very helpful: '*they help me a lot to step up and go onto the right track, as in helping us education wise, personal things wise, they are there and they help me a lot'*, she said. Unfortunately, the timeframe of the study did not allow to gauge the outcomes, to see to what extent it helped them in their job search. Importantly, the council also announced a number of apprenticeships at the local authority, and both James and Rosie applied for them, they were waiting for the results when I met them second time. According to his social media profile, James became an apprentice, then got employed there. However, I did not receive any further updates about Rosie.

Rosie had a large network of extended family and friends, and she used these connections proficiently to access jobs (discussed in the next section). These however, seemed short term and precarious. The NEET programme and contact with the youth workers there could have potentially provided her an opportunity to bridge out into more secure, better paid positions, as James did. Unlike Rosie, James did not have extended social networks with close bonding ties. However, his network with relatively poor social capital provided bridging opportunities: he accessed the NEET course through a friend; and also, James' grandmother worked at the same council, and she provided him with information and advice. It is not unlikely that his grandmothers social capital improved his chance of getting employed by the council. Without providing employment at the end, however, such pre-employment courses might add to the list of provision that young people, especially those with low qualifications are churning through.

Accessing the job market through social networks

As discussed earlier, the majority of participants were still engaged in education or training during the study. They were convinced that by improving their attainment and qualifications or obtaining valuable work experience through apprenticeships will provide them a better chance on the labour market. A few participants however were not keen on studying further, instead they wanted to find a job and start earning, including Ezra and Hugh. They only considered re-engaging in education because they were not able to secure a job without qualifications.

In their case, family and friends seemed instrumental in getting jobs. For instance, Hugh mentioned getting odd-jobs from a friend of his mother. Ezra's father also provided him with occasional work: '*When [my brother] was in Italy I was working with my dad to do kitchen fitting and bathrooms and all that. So yeah, I got £50 a day for that.*

Ezra relied mainly on his friends for information about jobs: '*Generally I just hear it from word of mouth from my friends',* he explained. His best friend who aspired to become an actor too, got a job at a cinema in Central London. Ezra would have liked to work there, so attended a group interview when his friend alerted him of an opening. However, he found the selection process very difficult and did not manage to secure a job. He realised that even for simple jobs there are many applicants, most of them with better qualifications than him.

In a way, looking for job through social networks was a coping strategy for Ezra, since he struggled with internet-based job-search: '*when I look on the internet, I just don't know where to start, where to look. [...] When I search it, there's so much comes up, I can't really narrow them down',* he explained. Hugh also mentioned the difficulties of online job applications. Since all applications asked for qualifications, even those for manual jobs, these young people with no qualifications were at a significant disadvantage. Apparently, some applications were rejected outright by the system if no qualification was given.

The informal networks of Ezra and Hugh seemed quite low in social, cultural and economic capitals, and only provided access to temporary, precarious and on-off jobs. Although they had had a few bridging ties – for instance, Hugh regularly met a council officer for one-to-one advice sessions and Ezra attended an FE college for two years where he had access to teachers and career advisors, these connections, during the lifetime of the project, did not seem to bring results in terms of education or employment.

Just like Ezra and Hugh, Rosie also left school with no qualifications and was NEET at the time. Unlike the young men however, she was embedded into extensive networks of family and friends and she used these connections with ease to secure jobs. She worked as a receptionist in her cousin's garage for a while, was offered a job at McDonalds when she went to a job interview with a friend, and she also worked in a sports shop. In addition, she was babysitting for a relative too for which she got some payment. Rosie came across very resourceful second time too: while applying for the apprenticeship, she had already been offered another job by a family friend, and they were ready to wait for her: '*It is pretty good as well, it is a till manager, account manager. They are like "you are good at accounts aren't you, so you can come and work for us." I was like "yeah but I want to see if my first plan works."'*

Although Rosie seemed adept at using her networks to secure employment, as she remarked, these were short term and financially insecure: '*for me, I don't know, work at least comes up for five months and then it will be just gone somehow, it's either like… that I've got something*

else to do, like need to go for a new job or something or the payment wasn't right.' Instead of access to good quality employment, these jobs kept her in a permanently precarious position, churning between low paid and short term position, NEET courses and volunteering.

Like the above participants, Evie's main goal was to secure employment; she wanted to work in a nursery. As explained in previous chapters, she had gained Level 2 Childcare qualifications at an FE college before and did not intend to study further for the time. Although she utilised her family networks to achieve her goal, her strategy was different. Years before, Evie was offered a volunteering position by her mother's friend, a nursery teacher*: 'my mum's friend worked, is a school teacher there so it was her idea to let me work in her class for a while to get a bit more work experience with the older children as well.'* Evie's parents had middle class jobs and their networks seemed much richer is social capital. Although Evie volunteered for years, at the end, she was offered a part-time paid job as a '*mealtime and breakfast club supervisor'*.

Evie's story could be phrased as a success story: a young girl with learning difficulties and minimum qualifications achieved her aspiration. However, this story obscures the considerable investment that Evie and her family put into securing a part time job. Evie volunteered at this nursery and many others for years, a strategy that other, more disadvantaged young people – like the ones presented earlier – would not be able to afford. What is more, even this volunteering position was contingent on her well-connected middle class parents. Therefore, Evie's 'success' functions to underline the difficulties underqualified young Londoners face in the job market, and the social inequalities that permeate this process.

Conclusion

This chapter explored participants' strategies aimed at achieving their aspirations, or, in some cases, just getting a job. The next, final chapter will bring together the ideas and findings discussed in *Chapters 5-8*, to develop a more holistic understanding of how aspirations are interpreted, constructed and implemented by young people in contemporary London.

CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION

The aim of my doctoral study was to explore how disadvantaged young people at risk of educational underattainment in London construct their aspirations and develop strategies to achieve their educational and occupational objectives. I was also interested in the specific beliefs, attitudes and values that shape their aspirations, as well as the social support systems available to them. Through these, I wanted to investigate the ways in which social inequalities manifest and reproduce during 'at-risk' young people's transitions from compulsory education.

This concluding chapter attempts to bring together and further discuss the findings presented in previous chapters. After summarising the findings, it is explicitly explained how this thesis contributes to knowledge. The next section will present the limitations to this study. The chapter ends with the implications of my study for policy and practice.

Summary of findings

The young people participating in this study overwhelmingly interpreted the concept of aspirations in terms of education and work. Although they were asked about aspirations in general, most participants named their educational and occupational aspirations first, and only mentioned other types of aspirations (for instance, family formation or travel) occasionally. Participants in this study – who were identified as being at risk of educational underachievement, many with low or no qualifications at the time of the fieldwork - seemed to have fairly high educational aspirations, with several of them entertaining the idea of going to university at some point in their lives. Even those participants mentioned university aspirations whose likelihood of getting admitted seemed minimal, because they had already left education without any qualifications, were NEET, and without a plausible plan to improve their academic attainment. I argued that participants' relatively high educational aspirations might reflect the ubiquitous 'aspiration discourse': in the context of widening participation in higher education and the normalisation of the university route, more young people consider tertiary education. However, with university attendance becoming the norm, young people might feel under pressure to present 'aspirational identities' and proclaim aspirations that are higher than those described in their implementation strategies, their plans for education and job-search. Therefore, the high educational aspirations presented can be interpreted as impression management techniques (Goffman, 1959), especially in education- and research-related settings.

In order to further explore this issue in terms of career planning, I employed the 'ideal aspirations' versus 'realistic expectations' framework. It was found that young people in my sample rarely differentiated between the two, instead they tended to describe what can be labelled as 'realistic aspirations'. Due to the research design and participant selection criteria, all participants were over 16 years old, and their relatively older age (compared to other research on aspirations that focus on school-aged young people, such as Archer et al., 2013; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011) might explain their more realistic approach to future planning. Since they were all post-GCSEs, most likely they had already have to consider and make choices regarding their future studies, training and work.

Most of the jobs they identified were 'traditional' occupations (such as nurse, doctor, teacher, lawyer, childcare professional and so on), suggesting a rather limited understanding of the types of jobs available in todays' London job market. Only very few participants mentioned 'dream occupations' in my research, and those who did were among the most disadvantaged: NEETs without any qualifications. It was felt that citing idealistic occupational aspirations, in their case, might have functioned as a mechanism of preserving much-valued 'aspirational identities'.

In Chapter 6, I presented a typology of aspirations. This was based not only on the end goal of aspirations, but also on the implementation strategies that young people described in their narratives. Based on my relatively small scale study, I identified four types of aspirations: linear, open and tentative aspirations and alternative visions of future. In this framework, (1) linear aspirations refer to aspiration narratives that include a clearly identified profession or occupation, and also an informed strategy on how to achieve that, including educational choices, work experience needed, and so on. According to my data, these aspiration strategies were described in a linear fashion, as one step leading to the next one, according to a pre-established plan. Some of the young people mentioned back-up plans as well. (2) In the case of open aspirations, the focus seemed to be on the immediate future, for example, the specific courses participants were aiming for, while leaving their occupational choices flexible. (3) Tentative aspirations denote narratives with several alternative occupational goals from unrelated fields, requiring different strategies to achieve them. The young people who had tentative aspirations often were not able to describe a credible, convincing strategy on how to achieve them. (4) Finally, some young people did not consider occupational goals as their defining aspirations, instead, they emphasized their intension to prioritise other aspects of life in their quest for meaning. This type was called alternative visions of the future. However, it was argued, that

those with alternative aspirations show orientations to their occupational goals that can be categorised under the other three types of aspirations.

Based on my data, linear and open aspirations both provided adequate framework for young people's future planning, and young people in this categories were able to successfully navigate the transition process, at least, for the duration of my fieldwork. In this sample, having different ideal and realistic aspirations corresponded with the tentative aspiration type. In addition, this group was the least likely to have a strategic short term plan. The longitudinal data revealed that young people from this group were the least likely to make progress over time. Their tentative aspirations seemed to be the symptom of either not knowing what they wanted to do, or feeling blocked in their aspirations.

With regards to the construction of aspirations, participants tended to emphasize motivational factors as the driving force behind their aspirations. Most participants agreed that emotional satisfaction derived from doing something enjoyable, something they are interested in was the most important criteria when defining their aspirations. This seemingly commonsensical disposition was identified as the main illusio of work among participants, reflecting society-wide assumptions on what work means and how one is supposed to orient themselves towards their jobs.

It was a common belief that intrinsic satisfaction gained from a job is more important than financial rewards. Even those who expressed financial motivations seemed to be embarrassed by it, and tried to downplay or explain why they considered monetary rewards at all. Many talked about their future jobs in the language of romantic love, further highlighting the importance placed on this topic. Conceptualised as the 'romantic illusio of work', this belief was identified as the main work-related ideology among these participants, likely reflecting wider beliefs.

On the one hand, this romantic illusio of work seems to have provided some participants with sufficient drive to pursue their aspirations. On the other hand, aligning with this illusio might have negative consequences for others. For instance, it might be insufficient motivational force for some, especially when it comes to the less enjoyable aspects of an occupation or job search. It can also prematurely reduce young people' s options when searching for aspirations, narrowing choices to already existing 'interests', and obscuring the actual process of interest formation and development, which is embedded in social networks and personal engagement with activities. It was argued that the romantic illusio of work enacts symbolic violence on

occupations that are harder to frame in the language of love and joy, and the people doing these jobs.

Curiously, participants tended to regard ‘interest’ as an attribute, something that one naturally possesses from an early age. The interviews revealed however, that interests usually grow from personal engagement with activities and people, and as such, they are deeply embedded in young people’s biographies and shaped by the social and cultural capital at their disposal. The majority of participants seemed to have relied on familial sources of capital, while others found their interests at school or training. It was argued that school can play a crucial role in providing students with subject knowledge, awareness about different occupations, but also bridging social capital through contact with teachers and other significant adults. This can be particularly important to young people whose own social networks might be lacking in social and cultural capital that is advantageous in education and the labour market. In addition, sport and youth clubs, and other activities for young people can provide this function too.

The analysis revealed that aspirations were strongly relational. Aspirations varied not based on difference in motivations, but difference in interests. Contrary to the conception of ‘interest’ as a characteristic of the person, young people’s biographical narratives revealed that ‘interests’ in fact, were born from experience. The romantic illusio of work – the conception of work as interest/ joy/ love and interest as an innate trait - seems to encourage introspection when searching for aspirations, obscuring the actual process of interest formation and development, embedded in personal engagement.

Opinions differed on the significance of other motivational factors. While some participants mentioned financial motivations – usually in the form of wanting a career that provides a comfortable existence, others considered intrinsic motivations only. There was a tendency among participants to downplay or excuse the importance of financial considerations, although the majority came from working class families, and several of them experienced poverty and socio-economic hardship. Since young people connected this with emphasizing intrinsic motivations, their disregard for financial motives was interpreted as another effect of the romantic illusio of work, which seems to discredit other motivations. This approach, however, might encourage exploitative practices – such as using young people’s voluntary work over an extended period, especially for more vulnerable young people and those making their first move into the labour market, with little economic capital and work experience to rely on.

The main strategy young people described to achieve their aspirations was to aim high, have positive attitude and work hard. Although their actions were clearly embedded into social networks, several young people seemed to devalue support from others, instead aiming to present themselves as autonomous individuals. While young people tended to present their aspirations in individualistic terms, stressing their own agency, motivations and choice, the analysis revealed that in fact, aspirations were constructed from within their horizons for action. In this regard, poverty, low or inadequate educational attainment, health-related issues and learning difficulties, and having a criminal conviction were found to impact most on participants' educational and occupational aspirations, reducing the range of options available to them.

When describing how they wanted to achieve their aspiration, or retroactively recalled their strategies, young people tended to emphasize their own agency. Most of them believed that with positive attitude, ambition and hard work, anything is achievable, as it was found elsewhere in the literature. However, these young people did not exhibit such optimism toward their future than found in other studies (Franceschelly and Keating, 2018). Perhaps the anxiety most displayed was connected to their more precarious, disadvantaged socio-economic location. For them, optimism or a positive attitude was in fact an implementation strategy they were trying to adopt.

By research design, all participants recruited to this study experienced adversities during their educational trajectory. They were selected for this study due to their high theoretical risk of academic under-attainment. The strategies employed reflected, to a large extent, young people's socio-economic locations and access to economic, social and cultural capitals through their networks.

Three distinct strategies were identified that young people adopted to negotiate the negative effects of low or no qualifications: improve their academic attainment and qualifications, gain advantage through enhanced employability and try to access the labour market. Although all participants were identified as being at a theoretical risk of academic underachievement, the economic, social and cultural resources at their disposal varied vastly, and these inequalities shaped the strategies they were able to employ to deal with disadvantage. Based on my data, having access to economic capital and/ or middle class cultural capital – in this case, mostly in the form of understanding the English education system and being able to play the 'game' – was crucial for achieving, for the time, short-term aspirations.

I also discussed how social inequalities shaped young people's aspirations and transitions in multiple ways. Those with access to richer cultural, social and economic capital were able to engage with a wider array of activities, extra-curriculars, work experiences, through their social network. This contributed to the widening of their horizons for action, thus were 'choosing' aspirations from a wider base. Different forms of capitals also provided protection from the negative effects of low qualifications. When implementing aspirations, some participants were able to access different schools, work placements, apprenticeships and jobs through their social networks. In fact, it seemed that many young people preferred hot knowledge when making decisions. However, some young people were bereft of any capitals, and these tended to stay NEET (although the study was not long enough to draw definitive conclusions).

Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes an original contribution to the study of aspirations and youth transitions. It also provides new insights into the reproduction of social inequalities in education and during transitioning into the labour market, as well as young people's agentic potential in this time period.

First, I proposed a more holistic conceptualisation of aspirations. According to this, the concept of aspirations needs to incorporate two interrelated dimensions: aspiration as an 'end goal' and aspiration as a 'process' – the aspiring, strategizing, future planning process on how to realise the 'aspiration as objective'. After all, the 'aspiring', 'future planning' element – the negotiation between external opportunities and constraints, as well as internal motivations, among other factors (explored in greater depth in Chapters 7 and 8) – can determine the outcome, whether an 'aspiration' (understood as an end goal) is 'realistic' or 'idealistic', attainable or not.

In the literature, the term 'aspiration' is commonly interpreted as an objective, as reviewed in Chapter 3 (for example, Baker et al., 2014; Berrington et al., 2016; Strand and Winston, 2008). This might have methodological reasons: a great deal of research is based on quantitative data and objectives are easier to measure through surveys than complex future planning schemes. There is a large literature on the determinants of aspiration, including socio-economic and socio-psychological influences (for example, Berrington et al., 2016; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Kintrea, St Clair and Houston, 2011; Rothon et al., 2011). However, these studies focus on factors that impact on aspirations, and not the agentic process of planning performed by young people. For instance, St Clair and Benjamin (2011) discuss the 'performative function'

of aspirations as such: '*aspirations arise from, and are embedded within, social contexts where they have performative value. In other words, the aspirations expressed by young people reflect the expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome, and are determined as much by a the needs of the moment as by a genuine expectation for the future'* (2011:502). The conceptualisation of aspiration that I am proposing goes one step further with shifting the perspective to the 'aspiring', 'future planning' act or process itself. I also argue that this is an inherent component of the concept of aspirations.

Unlike 'aspirations as objectives' that can be measured relatively easily through surveys, the 'aspirations as future plans' are more difficult to capture both in research and practice. The latter rely on conversations and narratives, for instance, as opposed to questionnaires. Nonetheless, this approach promises a more nuanced, theoretically sound understanding of the concept of aspirations.

Thus, based on a conception of aspirations described above, I developed a typology of aspirations that has implications for both theory and practice. Based on my data, I identified four types of aspirations: linear, open and tentative aspirations and alternative visions of future, as described in the previous section. In addition to providing a classification framework to a concept that is notoriously difficult to theorise, this typology can also be used in practice as a diagnostic tool. First, it encourages a holistic approach and more substantial engagement with young people. Then, applying the framework to individual cases can highlight problematic cases, when young people need additional support. The discussion below will further illuminate the framework and its practical value.

Thirdly, my thesis provides a detailed account on young people's perspectives on aspirations and the motivations that drive their future planning. By applying Bourdieu's lesser known concept of illusio, I provided an innovative, timely and nuanced analysis on young people's work-related values and beliefs. My discussion on the 'romantic illusio of work', the common belief that the most important criteria for choosing a future occupation is 'being interested', 'enjoying', 'loving' that specific career or industry, highlights the limitations and dangers of simplistic and superficially attractive messages about the world of work. I also demonstrated how such messages are adopted into neoliberal ideologies, and as such, function to reinforce beliefs in a meritocratic social system and divert attention from social inequalities.

Limitations of the study

Like with any other research project, a number of limitations need to be acknowledged when evaluating the claims made in this thesis. Many of these limitations are the result of the methodological approach chosen for this study.

First, this being a relatively small scale qualitative research, there are limits to the generalisability of the finding. Although the 30 interviews conducted with 15 participants provided very rich data on the aspirations, future plans and transition experiences of young people, it needs to be emphasized that my sample, by design, only included youth with a very specific profile: they were all at risk of leaving education with low or no qualifications. Therefore, broadening the sample with a more diverse selection of young people might provide further insight into the aspirations, motivations and career strategies of young people coming from different class locations. This limitation is particularly salient for the aspiration typology introduced in Chapter 6. Since all participants occupied an underprivileged position in the education system and on the youth labour market, it is difficult to ascertain whether and how their disadvantaged social location influenced the findings of this study. Interviewing more privileged and higher achieving young people might facilitate new understanding of aspirations. Potentially, the list of aspiration types presented is not exhaustive: it is very likely that other types can also be distinguished with larger sample sizes, or in different geographical or socio-economic contexts. For instance, alternative aspirations might be more varied than my data suggests; for example, young people with artistic or musical aspirations may formulate different types of strategies. However, the four aspirations types can provide the base for further theorizations. These can also be used as analytical tools to explore young people's aspirations and career strategizing.

Also, the study was completed at one single geographic location. As argued in Chapter 2, London provides a unique setting for social research. By limiting data collection to this city, the findings are necessarily shaped by the specific socio-economic environment and opportunity horizons that characterize this global city. Further research and possibly comparative studies are needed to understand the extent to which the findings of this research are transferable to other locations, for instance, smaller towns and villages.

My sample had further limitations: all participants were post-GCSEs, between 16-21 years old. Expanding the age groups would aid our understanding of aspiration construction. It would be particularly interesting to explore aspiration construction at a younger age, then around the

time when students choose their GCSE subjects, to see how internal motivations and opportunity horizons influence these choices.

On a related note, I argue that more longitudinal qualitative studies are needed in this field. While we know more about the determinants of aspirations and changes over the years in terms of aspirations as end goals, the aspiring, future planning, strategizing process is still little understood. I think that the longitudinal design is a strength of my study. However, this was still a PhD study with obvious time limitations, with the time difference between the two interviews varying between 5 moths to 2 years. While to some extent, I was able to explore changes in aspirations, my data does not address how different aspiration types and career strategies correlate with future outcomes.

Another limitation of my study is that I only included interviews with young people themselves, therefore the perspective of other relevant stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, career advisors and youth workers, to name a few, is not addressed in this study.

It is also important to mention that I aimed to explore the commonalities across the stories of disadvantaged young people, who, on the other hand, varied significantly in terms of ethnicity, migration and education background, and religion. Consequently, I did not analyse my data along these variables, so gender and ethnic differences are minimally addressed in my thesis. Given the fairly small number of participants, I did not think it is methodologically justified to draw conclusions on how gender, ethnicity, religion, and so on structure and shape young people's aspirations and future planning.

This limitation might also be connected to my specific theoretical framework. Using a largely Bourdieusian analytical toolkit, I focused my attention on social inequalities related to class position. Arguably, employing a different theoretical apparatus would help unpick how aspirations differ along gender, ethnicity and other variables.

Implications for policy and practice

In this thesis, I explored young people's beliefs about the world of work: what constitutes a 'good job' and what are the criteria of choosing one. My analysis found that young people tend to have rather idealistic and simplistic ideas about these issues, and the role and transformative potential of education. They seem to have internalised neoliberal messages about a meritocratic social order where ambition, positive attitude and hard work are the most important, if not only, determinants of educational and career success.

Based on these findings, I argue that young people need access to more practical and realistic messages about career construction. As it has been discussed, schools can play a crucial role in providing students with subject knowledge, awareness about different occupations, but also bridging social capital through contact with teachers and other significant adults. This can be particularly important to young people whose own social networks might be lacking in social and cultural capital that is advantageous in education and the labour market. In addition, sport and youth clubs, and other activities for young people can provide this function too.

Then, I also demonstrated that aspirations are relational in nature, they emerge from experiences. However, the role of experience is not addressed clearly in the discourse on aspiration, the abstract aspiration model presumed by official policy documents, whereby young people chose their high aspirations based on informed decision making, weighing the pros and cons of different occupations, after researching different occupations' employability potential and consulting significant adults. In order to broaden young people's horizon and raise their aspirations, I argued that they need access not only to adequate information but also exposure to and engagement with varied experiences, including diverse subjects at school, extracurricular activities, work experience and connection with adults from different walks of life. However, there is growing evidence (Abrahams, 2016) about the polarization of schools in regards to the subjects provided. Schools with less funding, especially in deprived areas, have a significantly narrower provision of subjects and extra-curriculars. These inequities in provision can have significant negative affect on aspirations: reduced access to valuable social and cultural capital can hinder young people's ability to develop a variety of 'interests' and thus reduces the scope of their aspirations.

The young people in this study have demonstrated incredible resilience in the face of overwhelming personal and structural difficulties. They do not need 'higher aspirations' but resources and more effective career information and guidance to achieve their educational and occupational goals. The most important aim of this thesis was to contribute, however small, to the building of a more equitable society where opportunity is not determined by class location or socio-economic origin.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Information Sheet for 1st interviews (dates adapted)

Appendix 2. Information Sheet for 2nd interviews

Appendix 3. Informed Consent Form

Appendix 4. Demographic Questionnaire (only for apprentices and NEETs)

Appendix 5. Topic Guide for Young People (students and apprentices – modified)

Appendix 6. Topic Guide for Young People NEET

Appendix 7. Topic Guide for Repeat Interviews

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe
(RESL.eu)

Resl.eu: a research project listening to young people

The RESL.eu (Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe) project is seeking to understand the **educational and career choices of young people** living in London. Altogether, young people across seven countries in Europe are participating in this project. Together you will give us valuable insights on how to improve our education systems.

Share your ideas with us

We would like to hear from you about the decisions you have made and your plans for the future. This is an important opportunity for you to **have your voice heard and to share your experiences** with policy makers and educational experts.

No one will know what we talk about: not your teachers, not your parents

Your identity will be protected at all times and everything you say will be **kept confidential**. The information you provide will be stored in a database and will not contain any personal information that could lead to the identification of research participants.

However, if you disclose that you are - or someone else is - in immediate danger of serious harm, bullying or abuse, we would need to report that to someone who might be able to help, such as the school's child protection officer.

We want to talk to you twice

We want to talk with you two times over a period of two years. First, between October and December 2014. When we talk to you again in two years we will understand better what you have been doing in this period.

We are from Middlesex University

The research project is managed by **Professor Louise Ryan** and **Alessio D'Angelo** from **Middlesex University,** working together with **Magdolna Lorinc** and **Neil Kaye**.

For more information see: https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/resl-eu/

The European Commission funds the RESL.eu project

This work has been funded by the **European Commission**, through the **EU Framework 7 Programme**. Nine European countries are involved, including the United Kingdom.

Do not hesitate to contact us

If you would like more information or have questions about the research, please contact us: **Prof. Louise Ryan** (l.ryan@mdx.ac.uk), who is leading the UK team; **Alessio D'Angelo** (a.dangelo@mdx.ac.uk), **Magdolna Lorinc** (m.lorinc@mdx.ac.uk) or **Neil Kaye** (n.kaye@mdx.ac.uk).

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe
(RESL.eu)

Resl.eu: a research project listening to young people

The RESL.eu (Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe) project is seeking to understand the **educational and career choices of young people** living in London. Moreover, young people across seven countries in Europe are participating in this project. Together you will give us valuable insights on how to improve our education systems.

Second interview

We have already talked with you in the last two years. We would like to talk to you again, to see what happened in your life in the intervening period.

Share your ideas with us

We would like to hear from you about the decisions you have made and your plans for the future. This is an important opportunity for you to **have your voice heard and to share your experiences** with policy makers and educational experts.

No one will know what we talk about

Your identity will be protected at all times and everything you say will be **kept confidential**. The information you provide will be stored in a database and will not contain any personal information that could lead to the identification of research participants.

However, if you disclose that you are - or someone else is - in immediate danger of serious harm, bullying or abuse, we would need to report that to someone who might be able to help.

We are from Middlesex University

The research project is managed by **Professor Louise Ryan** and **Alessio D'Angelo** from **Middlesex University,** working together with **Magdolna Lorinc** and **Neil Kaye**.

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Informed Consent Form for Young People

I ………………………………………………………………….. (print name) **confirm** that:

- I have read and understood the information enclosed, and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I confirm that I have had opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that the discussion will follow general issues about schooling, educational aspirations and future plans and will not ask me any questions of a personal nature.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from the interview at any time, or may refuse to answer any questions, without having to give an explanation.
- I understand that all information about me will be anonymised and remain confidential, and that I will not be named or identifiable in any written work arising from this study.
- I agree to the interview being audio recorded. I understand that any digital recording of me will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed on completion of your research.
- I understand that any information including direct quotes given by me may be used anonymously in future publications, reports, articles or presentations.
- I understand that one of my parents might also take part in this research and I agree with it. I understand that all interviews are strictly confidential and neither my parent, nor I will find out what the other said during their interview.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Middlesex University' Ethics Committee.
- I **agree to be interviewed** for this research study.

Signature: _______________

Date: ___________________

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name: ……………………………………………………………

2. Email: ………………………………………. Phone number: ………………………

3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

4. Date of birth: ……………………..

5. Your ethnicity: ☐ White: English/ Welsh/ Scottish/Northern Irish/British
☐ White: Irish ☐ White: Gypsy/Irish Traveller ☐ White: Other
☐ Mixed: White and Black African ☐ Mixed: White and Black Caribbean ☐ Mixed: White and Asian
☐ Mixed: Other ☐ Asian/Asian British: Indian ☐ Asian/Asian British: Pakistani
☐ Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi ☐ Asian/Asian British: Chinese ☐ Asian/Asian British: Other
☐ Black/Black British: African ☐ Black/Black British: Caribbean ☐ Black/Black British: Other
☐ Arab ☐ Other ethnic group (please specify) ……………………

6. Which of the following qualifications have you already achieved? (Select all that apply)

☐ no qualifications
☐ functional skills
☐ GCSEs at grades D-G
☐ 5 A*-C GCSEs (without English and math)
☐ 5 A*-C GCSEs, including English and math
☐ AS / A-levels
☐ Vocational qualifications
Level 1☐ Level 2☐ Level 3☐
☐ Apprenticeship
☐ Other qualifications (please specify):
……………………………………………

7. Which borough do you currently live in London? ………………

8. Were you born in the UK? ☐ yes ☐ no, where were you born: …………………………..

   a. If not, when did you arrive in the UK: ....

9. Were your parents born in the UK: ☐ yes ☐ no, where were they born: ………………………………
………………………………………………………
……………..

10. What language do/ did you speak at home with your parents?

☐ English ☐ Other (please specify): ………………

Topic Guide for the Interview with Young People

Aspirations:

1. What do you hope to do after you finish school? What are your ambitions for a career?
   a. Why, what gave you that idea? What do you like about this job?
   b. What are the 3 most important things you are looking for in a job? (if not mentioned: money)
   c. How do you plan to achieve that? (qualifications, work experience, financial resources, other)
   d. Is the school helping you achieve that goal? If so, how?
   e. Do you know anyone with this job? Have you talked to them about their job + how they got there?
   f. What have you done so far in order to achieve your dream job/ plans? What else can you do?
   g. Are there other occupations you are considering?
2. What would your family like you to do – college/ job? How do you feel about that?
   a. Have other people in your family attended university/ apprenticeship? (parents' occupation)

Social networks

3. Are your family helping you achieve your goals?
4. What kind of jobs do your family friends have? And the parents of your friends?
5. Who are your role models? (famous people but also known people in family/ community)
6. Are you involved in activities outside of school? (faith group, community or sport club, music, art)
7. Have you done any work experience, internship or paid work? What exactly?
   a. When? How did you get them? Was it through school?
   b. How did you find it? Was it useful? What did you take away from that experience?
   c. Would you ask a family friend to help you getting work experience?
   d. Would your parents do this for you?
8. What are your friends planning/ hoping to do – in terms of college, university, apprenticeships, career?
   a. Do you discuss future plans with your friends?
   b. Who are your friends? Are they mainly from the school? Neighbourhood? Home country?
9. Who (else) can you turn to for advice/ support about education, training qualifications, job opportunities? (careers advisor)
10. Is there anything else that could help you achieve your dreams? What are the main challenges you might face? Overcome?

If they attend intra-muros:

11. Do you attend any extra classes in school, after school? Are you involved in any clubs or activities in school?
12. How did that come about – did you ask or did teachers suggest it to you?
    a. How long have you been attending?
13. What have you gotten out of this? Is it useful?
    a. (If so) In what way? (If not useful) How could it be improved?
14. Are you aware of what programmes your school offers? How would you find out?

School engagement and processes of exclusion and inclusion:

15. What do you like (and dislike) about school? 1 best + 1 worst thing about this school
16. Do you think you are a good student? Do you work hard?
    a. What motives you to work hard? / What prevents you from working hard?
    b. Do you attend regularly? (If not: Why not?)
17. Do you get into trouble at school? (If so) With who? What about?
    a. Why do you think that happens?
    b. Do you ever get into trouble because of your friends?
18. Do you think the school treats you fairly? Could you do things differently to avoid trouble?

19. What do you think, what are the main challenges that young people are facing nowadays?
    a. Does the present economic situation have any impact on how you think about your future?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Topic Guide for Interviews with Young People NEET

Education, training and work experience

Educational trajectory

Perspective on education (what like/ dislike about schools/ college; support received in schools/ colleges; school engagement)

Qualifications obtained

Any further training after leaving school

Work experience (paid jobs, internship, work experience, volunteering)

Future plans

Future aspirations - short and long term

Aspirations for future jobs (what gave the idea; plan to achieve it; plan b, if any)

Challenges and opportunities

Strategies to overcome challenges

Social and Cultural capital

Help and assistance from family

Friends (friend's future plans and present activities)

Role models (famous people but also known people in family/ community)

Activities at a community or sport club, faith group, music, art, etc.

Support services available

Topic Guide for the Follow-Up Interview with Young People

Education and personal trajectory

Changes since previous interview and present situation

Perspective on education and personal trajectory

Future plans and perspectives on the labour market

Social and cultural capital

Resilience and challenges