Introductory slide: Before I begin, I think it would be useful for me to contextualise what I'm going to talk about by briefly introducing who I am, and why it was thought that I was well placed to share some of my educational experiences at this important, and timely, conference on male aspiration.

Since beginning university in 2009 large parts of my identity, sense of self, and sense of who I want to be, have changed drastically. I arrived at university not really valuing academic achievement, or knowledge found in books. Now I voluntarily spend hours each day just keeping track of new developments in my field of research, living a rather inactive life reading and writing. My aspirations have also undergone transformation.

Today, I have been granted the privilege to talk to educators and scholars from across the region and share some of my ideas about how we can develop our practices, and mindsets, to better support working class males that are in the process of carving out their futures. Tomorrow, I will be wearing one of those floppy hats as I graduate with my PhD. For my family, and my friends, this funny ritual signifies a symbolic destination of social mobility, and success. Whilst I will be celebrating these perceived achievements with those who have been a great support to me, on a personal level, the qualification that I will receive tomorrow merely signifies new horizons of exciting possibilities - possibilities that motivate me as I go through the mundane day-to-day ritual of apply for jobs.

Like many academics that I know, I have kind of found myself at this position, moving along this path sort of by accident. My direction of travel has been partly dependent upon my background but also a seres of events outside of my control. My aspirations have been shaped by many experiences throughout my life. Having the honour to address this conference today and completing my formal education tomorrow has provided a moment for me to pause. These two events have prompted me to reflect upon how I have ended up here, and where I am going - *but more importantly*, it has given me the conditions to consider how other students with similar backgrounds to myself can be supported in the development, and pursuit, of their own productive and fulfilling aspirations.

Following this trail of thought I think is especially important in 2018, in East Anglia as it is across the world. I do not envy the students I teach here at the UEA - I sincerely believe that there are even greater challenges facing millennial's today than the ones I encountered as a 90's baby. Not least because of the question of tuition fees. Apparently the jury is still out on what the legacy of the rise in tuition fees will be. Whilst there will be people in the audience today more qualified than myself to quantify this, when I put myself in the shoes of those young people leaving further education this summer, I find it very difficult to say with accuracy, whether I would have made the £9000 + commitment to pursue my academic interests. Not least because at the age of 18 I don't think I had many, if any, interests beyond playing Rugby…

Slide 1: My keynote address, in many ways, is quite simple. I only have two aims. The first is to respond to the damaging, but widespread, notion of a 'gap in aspiration' for the section of society we have gathered here today to discuss. A deficit model of aspiration is frequently cited in academic literature as a hindrance to WP agendas. The deficit model of aspiration, put simply, is the view that certain sections of society lack the appropriate aspirations, and therefore educators must do better to 'raise' these aspirations - to close the gap if you will. This BBC article published in June this year provides a clear example of this perspective. In this report the idea that white working class males lack the aspiration and drive to succeed in life is evident in the analysis spouted by the Ofstead Chief, Amanda Spielman.

This is not a lone voice. This reflects what I consider to be a static, or 'framed' conceptualisation of aspiration that is widely shared in educational policy and practice. The argument that aspiration is often 'framed', and unproductively so for white working class males, is a theme that I will return to later. Whilst the first aim of my keynote address is to critique taken-for-granted assumptions of what aspiration is, and how ridiculous it can be to talk about their being a lack of it, I recognised the need to do this sensitively. Or in more precise terms, I need to do this in a way that takes seriously long-standing and real issues with educational access, retention, attainment and progression.

Data clearly shows us that there are issues of disadvantage that have long been identified as problematic for the specific population this conference has been organised in-service of. Whilst I do not have time this morning to paint a detailed picture of trends that constantly show that white working class males are less likely to attend university, especially Russell group institutions, have high levels of dropout, tend to graduate with lower grades and often progress into less desirable work, details of this can be found in the 2014 published house of commons report titled: *Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children.*

The second aim, I think, is more important. And that is to extend an invitation. An invitation to start to think about educational aspirations in a new light.

Rather than drawing heavily on my own research, or statistically rich accounts of male aspiration to make this argument, I have been asked to elaborate upon my personal experiences. The reason for me sharing these experiences is not to self indulge, and I hope it isn't received as such. While the stories of my education can only provide one unique and contextualised voice of something that resembles white working-class male experience - I hope you reflect upon your own stories, of your past, or your experiences of working with white working class males

In a bid to fulfil these the two ambitious aims I have just set out, I will devote the rest of this keynote to developing an understanding of what I have called the fluidity of aspirations. In order to develop this, the there are two key territories that, I argue, we must critically examine if we are to better understand the aspirations of white working class males. The first one is the notion of *class* (how it intersects with gender and for want of a better word 'whiteness'). And secondly, from this basis we must then also reconsider what 'aspirations' are. Only then, from this position, can we do more to better support male aspiration.

<u>**Slide 2:** On class</u>

Ask: *Its such a common phrase, but who are we talking about when we are describing the plight of the 'white working-class'?*

Are we talking bout: 'Those left behind', and seemingly marginalised, in the wake of globalisation? Those people that the Guardian columnist, Lynsey Handley, characterised as "<u>**uniformly bewildered by change, whose sense of loss began in the era of mass immigration**</u>". By extension, especially last week during the climactic stages of the football world cup, have some of us begun to think of those often intoxicated and loud males wrapped in the Saint Georges cross? At the same time, do some of us fleetingly consider the recent political landslides that have occurred on a global scale. In the context of a new set of public mandates, voted for since 2016, have some of us began think of, and talk about Brexit as a reaction of the white working class? And consequently do we implicitly believe that white working-class males in the UK as having aspirations to be protected from the perceived cultural and economic threats of the freedom of movement. Across the pond, in America, how many commentators write about white working class males as the grass route populist engine giving power to Trump and his political agenda? In other words, have any of us accidentally demonised this group - if so, perhaps another Guardian columnist, Owen Jones, could write another book about the portrayal of the working class in our minds as well as in the media. He could probably call it <u>**Chavs 2**</u>.

Or when we are talking about white working class males are we not demonising or pathologising them, are we instead looking down upon them as victims. Whilst we might talk with good intention might we accidentally be creating an image of poor, helpless, rural, and service workers that have felt the 'full burden of economic dislocation', as the chief Inspector of OFSTED pointed towards?

Whilst there are *objective indicators* that often seek to set boundaries to clarify who we mean by 'white working-class males' (some of which I will touch upon in the text slide) all of us cannot easily escape broader assumptions about this population. This can be very problematic within educational settings (as I will endeavour to illustrate later through my own experiences). It is a part of our lives, as a social beings, that cultural stereotypes can be powerful in shaping how we view the students we work with. And in the current climate it is not uncommon for there to be a tendency to be too quick to write-off white working class males, to view them as deviants that might never amount to much, or to pathologise them as Garth may elaborate upon - or more likely correct me in his address.

Even if we could ignore the cultural and subjective dimensions of class, the measurable aspects of 'class' are also complex. In 2013 Professor Mike Savage and colleagues conducted the 'Great British Class Survey' and identified 7 categories of class. Many more sociologists argue about the definitions, and distributions of, class. In the wake of the industrial revolution, capitalism and neoliberalism has entered all aspects of society and commerce and subsequently marxist categories of the proletariat (or the working-class) and the bourgeoisie (those who profit from others labour and production) have been left wanting. So in order to conceptualise class, for the purpose of this conference, I want to draw attention to the complex interplay between various objective and subjective indicators that all play a role in forming student aspirations. I will do this by trying to map out my own class relations and experiences.

Slide 3: Background

A pool of evidence suggests, and it is true, that class backgrounds have a bearing on the formation of aspiration. Naturally, people learn through experiences and these are contingent on their positions in society. Form the perspective of a French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu someones class identity and background structures that individuals tastes, it predisposes them to formulate particular ways of seeing the world, and therefore it shapes their likely trajectory through education and into work. Whilst his theoretical framework is far more nuanced and powerful than I have scope to delve into today, the general idea that students' embody and live through their class background can be useful for us to try and explain why 'low aspirations' are persistent, or reproduced across generations. Bourdieu's work is often drawn upon in research then to suggest how class has the power to curb personal aspiration, not least by framing what people like me are capable of doing, where people like me can go.

This slide provides some *class relevant* snapshots of my home town. This colourful map is courtesy of HEFCE and if you have not already I urge you to log on and check where you work, and where you grew up. For the first 18 years of my life I lived in Weston-super-Mare then I moved to Cardiff. For those of you with limited geographic knowledge of the Southwest these are the two red areas on the map. Red is a indicator of low rates of participation in Higher Education, in my postcode the rate is 14.6% - and coincidently the coast line of East Anglia and parts of Norwich are very similar colours. Of course the similarities don't stop there. We too in Weston have a distinctive accent, a large farming industry, and a love for the production and consumption of Cider - in Somerset we have a particular taste for what we call the 'rough stuff'. It's too rough for my tastes now, I cant drink it.

As the Office for National Statistics show we both have similar wages for the bottom 20% of males, around £1 an hour over the minimum wage. We both have have issues with unemployment and underemployment. And whilst there are relatively low levels of immigrants living in both of our regions there are fears of 'mass migration' - unlike Great Yarmouth, Weston did not vote quite as much as **71.5%** in favour of exiting the European Union though.

Whilst these 'objective class indicators' are important, a reality of the town that strikes a more accurate chord with me can be found on a long list of celebrities twitter feeds. Inevitably after an unfortunate famous person has had the displeasure of visiting the crumbling seaside town they cannot help but post something online. John Cleese grew up in the same town as me and apparently based faulty towers on it, describing the town as a 'tedious little place', tweeting, "**It's supposed to be a seaside resort - more like a seaside last resort if you ask me**". With the town having a large population in retirement and a huge European drug rehabilitation programme I share Cleese's analysis. However, it was Jimmy Carr who encapsulated the lack of excitement I experienced growing up in a place where it rained almost all of the time. Partly in response to our boredom we used to make our own entertainment in some of the predictable ways that teenagers do - there are only so many sandcastles you can build before you get more joy in smashing them down. Luckily my group of friends, for the most part, were not into vandalism, anti-social behaviour or petty crime, so we all avoided ASBO's. The 'sinking mud' metaphor included in Jimmy's tweet however also represents a sense that I shared with my peers and that is that the sense that longer you stay in Weston, the more you will sink into it and become part of it. It is a place we thought you had to be careful not to loose all those aspirations you once had. Although we were all aware of this, in my close group of friends consisting of 5 males - 2 of us couldn't escape, they still live in their family home, with a family now of their own.

Banksy captured this collective consciousness in a way that only she or he could. This sense of boredom, stagnation, and greyness is as much a part of my experience growing up as the low paid jobs, high unemployment and a lack of young people that progress to Higher Education are to the community. *Inevitably white working-class males, including myself, can become deeply influenced by all these factors in a myriad of ways.*

Slide 4/5: Education

Just as important as my place of birth in shaping my relationship to a class identity was my educational experiences. This is taken from a 2005 OFSTED report of my school - when I was 15 years old. This is the school I remember. Without accurate statistical indicators to hand I remember the financial hardships of the students and their families who attended - for example, I remember how some of my friends only had outside toilets. Whilst we were relatively well-off as a family, I remember at Collage being in receipt of the Full Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and at University receiving the Full Maintenance Grant. I remember supplementing this state given income throughout my Further and Higher Education, by walking the donkeys up and down the seafront for £15 a day, working underage in bars, and later landing a genuinely lucrative gig as a caretaker. I have never since made so much money, not even in my role as a Senior Research Associate a couple years ago!

Back to my secondary schooling experiences. More than a general lack of wealth and resources I remember how we had 5 head teachers in as many years. Each one arriving at the beginning of term with a more expensive car than the last - bragging how they will 'turn the school around', using business terms such as, efficiency, unleashing competitiveness, discipline and restructuring the academy. After their token year in office and with 'performance indicators' on the steady decline they would speed away in their sports car, and large salary, to 'make a difference' to another school that were in desperate need of their help. The main indicator the local newspaper, the Weston Mercury, used to be obsessed with was the percentage of students that achieved 5 A*-C grades. Sure there was an unarguable lack of education attainment, for example, the year I left school the pass rate for GCSE's was 14% and was consistently low. But for OFSTED it was the legacy of '*under*achievement' that warranted the school stay in 'special measures' for six consecutive years. Their report indicated that lots of male student progressed little in academic terms between Key Stage 3 and 4.

Quite accurately from my recollection at least, there was a particular difficulty in engaging 'lower ability boys' - but this I feel is quite kind of OSTED. I was technically in the 'top sets' and the boys in my class were so unengaged in the lessons we spent playing Pokemon on the gameboy as well as having competitions to see how long we could go without writing in our books - we could go for months, not days without writing a single word, quite easily.

This collective failure in an academic term was for us something to treasure. I remember this being a badge of honour, rather than dishonour. Part of me even today is proud of the schools achievement (or lack thereof, at least we excelled in something). Most of me however is pained by the systemic lack of opportunities and mobility on offer for us. And because of Facebook for the last 10 years I have been tracking my old school mates as they go in and out of prison, go through bouts of mental health crisis, become obsessed with bulking and shredding seasons at the gym. They also repost 'fake news' and complain about their working lives on these social media platforms. Some of the issues run deeper than how many GCSE's they left school with but the measurable lack in attainment persisted like clockwork on a yearly basis. This is until a year after I left when eventually the school was shut for good. The bulldozers came and a new academy chain erected some expensive looking buildings amongst the rubble. The same 'socially deprived' families remain and I can only assume so do their aspirations - or lack there of as many would assume, and OFSTED would conclude.

Of course these issues can be seen, to varying degrees, across the UK and in East Anglia. These factors remain resilient, they have might not have changed that much, even if buildings and the staff have been replaced.

Slide 6: Family

With my full name being Edmund Jerome Barker, Jerome being a tribute to the author Jerome K Jerome, it is not hard to see that I infiltrated the 'working-class' through geographic proximity and economic circumstance - I admit I am a fraud. This is only partly true, how can I separate my sense of self, and sense of who I want to become, form where I grew up, and my education. So while I feel that my routes are firmly fixed to the folk of Weston, my neighbours, my class mates, and my rugby club. My extended family reveals different class positions. Feel free to peruse at this family tree I proceed. Tomorrow, I will become the 5th in my family to be awarded a PhD, or equivalent. Other notable achievements within the clan include attending, Oxford, Cambridge, Havard, Yale, UCL, Kings College London, Bristol University and so on. Both my siblings have degrees, and my father has an architecture firm located in a posh area in Bristol, a couple minutes from Clifton suspension bridge. This is most defiantly not a working class occupational status, or typical of the area I grew up. Despite my father's occupation, due to the finical crisis of 2008, as stated, I was eligible for government support to study at College and in University. With many of my family excelling academically and professionally I suppose I always had the confidence that anything was within my grasp. Importantly however when I was young none of this shaped my aspiration to become an academic - the main thing I aspired to was rugby, and this may have been partly informed through family influences: my Uncle was head rugby Coach for England back in the 1970s.

Through examining my position within class structures on planes of geographic location, education, and family it is evident that 'profiling' class is no simple task. When I look at the 7 classes recently identified in the Great British Class survey, I struggle to place myself in any of them at different moments in my life. Not everyones class profile with have the extreme contours that mine does, nevertheless each student will have a unique set of objective and subjective relations to class. It is the sheer distance between the different realms of my life that puts class into stark contrast, often putting it towards the forefront of my psyche - and perhaps this is a reason why I was drawn to sociology? Maybe in a Bourdieusian sense, my trajectory into academia was likely, given my confused positions within class structures. Perhaps my desire to make sense of these relations better has determined that I travel down a path of sociological enquiry.

The take home message from this section on class is that it is extremely difficult to define unequivocally what class is and to place students within one of them. This is especially the case in modern society where class structures are fragmenting. To make this picture more complex is that class intersects with gender and ethnicity, again in a number of ways. What it means to be 'a man' is in transition, there are competing masculinities that on offer to young people. What it means to be 'White British' is another contested area. Consequently as Professor Penny Jane Burke recognised, it is incredibly problematic to target potential white working class male students "**as a homogenous group with a similar voice and a similar set of needs and interests**" (2012, p.104). So I hope that by reflecting upon your own class positions, or those of your students, you will be reminded to not think of white working class males as a homogenous group - because to do so would be a crude misrepresentation. If it is the case that class is complex, and might not be an all binding part of someones identity, then why are commentators sloppy in making assumptions about shared aspirations? And why do researchers seek evidence that supports hypothesises that there is some sort of 'lack of aspiration'?

Ask: *Remember this question? We used to ask it all the time - perhaps you still ask it to your students. What do you want to do when you are older? This is another way to ask what are your aspirations?*

I want you to take a second to fill this black background, in your mind, with vivid images of your aspirations that may be from memory or they could be present ones. What is it that you see there?

This is me. I am not going to bore you by go through this collage to explain how these images of my past shape how I think about, and pursue, my future. The point I am trying to get across here is that when we invoke the question of what we want to do, we are at the same time invoking the question of who we want to be. And for each and every one of us I expect there is not just one unified image of who we want to be, of what we want to do. We can all make collages of our aspirations, that change throughout our lives - maybe even from moment to moment for some of us. **For want of a better word, I view my aspirations as being 'fluid'**. If this is also the case for you, you might begin to understand that as social beings we don't have an aspiration in the singular sense, we have aspirations with almost limitless boundaries. We don't have one identity we have a multiplicity of identities. However, a show of hands please, just to disprove my working theory, did anyone in this room only imagined one version of themselves, and one clear image of who they wish to be?

…

I find it hard to imagine a reality where aspirations are not an inescapable part of our moment-to-moment experience. They are in many ways opposite to what we may think of as anxieties. Aspirations tend not to be focused on the possibilities that the individual deems to be negative for them - they are futures that we yearn for. We all have aspirations, but the problem is that some of us have a set of aspirations that are compatible with societal expectations and policy targets, whereas, others do not.

So what are these aspirations that contemporary society and education demands? You might have a sense of what these are. I have no time to go into these in detail today but I will give one example.

Since Thatcher, at the very least, aspirations have been politicised. There is a field of academic literature that seeks to understand the politics of aspiration. The 'right to buy' was one flagship policy that targeted the votes of those that aspire to own their own home. In this UK citizens were encouraged to aspire to own property, both as a marker of their success and as their right. This has the effect of making those who pursue capital, in the form of monetary wealth and property a member of the 'aspiring class' - even if this pursuit is accompanied with debt, such as the debt one accumulates by attending university. Those who share these aspirations are recognised in a series of government papers as the engine of our economy. I will not endeavour to elaborate on how the tentacles of a neoliberal project shapes education and society now, I believe Garth is going to unpack this a little later, he is far more qualified than I to do so. All I would conclude from this collage behind me, is that we all have multiple aspirations that change, and at times they can contradict one and another. And thats fine. An 'aspiring class does not exist and we should not aspire to create one'. Indeed Professor Steven Godard recognised that in the current educational climate the aggressive prioritisation of aspirations is a "red herring" for policy development and for practitioners.

Therefore, the academic community do not just provide a political and societal critique of aspiration. There are very specific issues here that may create barriers to learning and development. In 1977 Paul Willis wrote a seminal book, called *Learning to Labour*, that has become a core reading for all sociologists. His research outlined some of the mechanisms that explain 'how working class kids get working class jobs'. Willis spent a great deal of time with white working class males in an urban school environment during the years that preceded Thatchers election success. His analysis demonstrates how these young people rebelled against authority and resisted the aspirations of the middle classes, and the school. 40 years later his work unfortunately still resinates far too much.

Slide 8: Framing Aspiration

Rather than reflecting a multiplicity of aspirations, this frame tends to set the criteria for what counts as aspiration. On the outside here are some interrelated factors that contribute to the shape of this frame. Whilst the boundaries of aspiration my not be as clear and sharp as this, they are still incredibly powerful.

This is because, when we implicitly frame aspiration we are imposing a hierarchy of high and low aspiration; or of acceptable and unacceptable aspirations. In doing so we cannot avoid but place some individuals, and groups, in the centre of the frame. Whereas others may be within the background, some might be in the margins, and the many unfortunate outcasts might be outside the picture altogether. This raises the question about where white working class males fit into this picture? I would argue between the margins and the space outside of the frame. Where might you include some of the students you work with here? Do you see it as your job to move everyone into the middle of this frame? Or to put it another way, to raise the aspirations of those on the fringes?

This is a Nobel quest - however, even if you do think this is the most desirable thing to do, I am not sure how effective this would be on two accounts.

Firstly, will there ever be enough room in the centre of the picture for everyone? In terms of occupations, and class positions, can we create a functional society where there is 'enough room at the top' for the majority of people to aspire. The cold hard reality is that there are only a limited number of lucrative, prestigious, and powerful jobs out there - only a limited number of university places on offer. It is a symptom of neoliberal free markets, and competition, that there will always be winers and losers. If our aim is to encourage all students should aspire to 'win' at this particular game, and they do not achieve their aspirations, could there be knock on repercussions? I expect this theme will be discussed later in a break out session on mental health.

Secondly and more importantly, research has shown us that it is not so easy to 'raise aspiration' in the traditional sense. This is something that I can illustrate through personal experience. I don't think I have ever been excluded from this frame, but for a large proportion of my life I think that I was in the margins.

Slide 9: <u>AimHigher</u>

Who recognises this logo? I sure do. This policy initiative, introduced in 2004, represents the beginning of Widening Participation strategies that were explicitly hinged on the promise that raising aspiration was the solution to social mobility, economic prosperity, and social progress.

Given that OFSTED had documented concerns about the underperformance of male students at my school, the school I ent to was targeted by this initiative from the very beginning. The unique characteristic of Aimhigher, in comparison with other widening participation initiatives before this, was the concept of "coordinated partnerships at an area and borough level, bringing together higher education institutions, further education colleges, schools and academies". Through these partnerships 'hard to reach' students, it was suggested, would receive the message that they too could go to university - and be part of the government's target to get 50% of the Country's youth into Higher Education.

This AimHigher initiative had a direct effect on my life, and my education. In 2007 educational researchers Baxter, Tate and Hatt drew upon interviews with students across the Southwest and concluded that "**participation in aimhigher is not viewed as a stigma, a sign of deficit, but as a bonus, an advantageous opportunity, in which many want to participate**" - they must not have interviewed myself, or my male friends. I vividly remember the mysterious presence of aimhigher suddenly appearing when I was 14 years old, so around 2004. I remember some unfamiliar faces coming to our school. They would appear in assembly and classes. They told us that there is no reason why we couldn't aspire to go to College and do a BTEC qualification. We were told that we could put our practical skills, or vocational talents and energy, to good use. Better still, we were told that we could *aimhigher*. We could go to university and do a degree. One day, I remember someone come into our school from a nearby Collage and explain with a passion that that because of the UCAS tariff system we could go on from our BTEC's to do degrees in 'David Beckham Studies' if we wanted. This was not as inspirational to us as she might have anticipated. There seemed to be a heavy emphasis on recruitment. A heavy emphasis on just telling young students that they have equal opportunities in education as others. What was presented was merely 'mirage of meritocracy', a message that if we had the natural ability, and work ethic, we could aspire to achieve goals that were not ours, but theirs.

Outreach exercises today are probably far more refined than this crude approach. But I remember that in school we used to find term 'aimhigher' to be patronising and snobbish. Personally, I resented the insulting indication that my desire to play Rugby for England was not a high enough aim.

Around the same time as external speakers were beginning to appear at our assemblies telling us that, 'we too could go to university', to crowds of yawns and indifference, I was selected for what was described as an programme for 'underachievers'. I can't be sure that both experiences were directly connected. In my year there were about five of us, and all of us that were put into this incentive were coincidently male. This might be a reflection of OFSTED's damming report that there was a deep seeded disfunction within the male culture of the school - a perception that we all had low aspirations.

The underachievers club, as I remember it, was sold to me as bespoke support system that was designed to help me fulfil my perceived academic potential. Essentially however, for all intents and purposes, for myself, and for others enrolled in the programme, it was permission to selectively skip lessons while exploiting the labour of a teaching assistant that would end up doing most of my course work for me - as I had no intention to do it myself. Shamefully now looking back at it, we found it an amusing game to play, where we fine tuned our skills to get away with doing as little as possible. I thought of these little experiences the first time I was reading Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour*.

Having superseded my GCSE's with more educationally prestigious awards since this time, in which I did all of the work to achieve them, I have little anxieties about publicly admitting to degrees of plagiarism buried in my educational history. I do not represent an isolated case, there were widespread practices that cut the corners of teaching and learning in the pursuit of raising that low GCSE pass rate. In the pursuit of these institutional targets and pressures I feel that my school robbed me of an *engaging education*. I was not an interested student, I did not value the same forms of knowledge as them - and few of us did. Instead of providing an engaging education the strategy was to plaster over the worst aspects of the social dynamics of the white working class males within the school by providing quick fixes, that inevitably failed. Or by quietly providing the means for students to cheat their way to get the desired results. Results that in many cases the School valued more than the students taking the exams.

For me getting good grades was more of a pain than a reward. I found it incredibly embarrassing to 'excel academically'. In our first maths lesson the maths teacher realised that I could add and multiply fractions quickly and accurately in my head. He took the opportunity in front of everyone to ask me question after question for minutes, increasing the difficulty. I used to enjoy mental arithmetic, and because of this couldn't help answer his questions, but all I remember is the entire class looking at me and my face turning bright red. I remember how my perceived mathematical ability haunted me for the next five years. I spent the rest of my time at that school trying to shake off the damage that this experience had on my masculine identity.

In 2010 HeFCE celebrated some of the successes of this AimHigher, that was by then being phased out and taking new forms. What was considered to be the positive legacy of this strategy remains today in the form of actively seeking to 'raise aspirations'. My experiences however are more critical of superficial attempts to 'raise aspiration'. The selected event and experiences I have just shared with you are in part negative byproducts of when aspirations are framed for learners rather than the learner forming, developing and pursuing their own productive aspirations. Again drawing on the words of Professor Penny Jane Burke, the problem with the aspiration raising agenda is that it **"constructs aspiration as decontextualised, disembodied and linear"** (2012, p.104). In other words, it overlooks the student, and their multiple and changing hopes for the future. This is why I argue that an alternative conceptualisation of aspirations is needed now as much as when I was in school.

Slide 10: An alternative: fluidity of aspirations

This little homemade animation is intended to represent an alternative way to think about aspirations. It is supposed to show how students multiple, and changing, aspirations should be harnessed through education and by educators. We should not try and fit them within a frame of our making. I invite you to consider this alternative perspective when you reflect upon how you go about supporting all students, including those who you identify as white working class males, in their progression through and beyond education.

Really there are only subtle differences between this conceptualisation and the 'framing of aspiration' that tends to subconsciously guide our practice, but these differences are important. The take-home message is that instead of focusing on 'raising aspiration' educators, and those responsible for educational systems, should think about how they influence and harness aspirations that lead to meaningful futures and the progression towards a fair 'society' - I will expand on that in a moment.

The green fluid is a steady and constant stream of student aspiration: there is an abundance of it, it is difficult to contain and we should try to contain it. It is constantly taking new forms. As it spills over into action it could go anywhere, students end up following their aspirations in many different directions. I am not arguing that students should be left alone and be completely free to follow these in any possible direction, because if they did much of this fluid could be spilt in unwanted places.

It is the role of educational policy, and individual educators, to harness these multiple and changing aspirations. They should help direct the fluid. Instead of starting from a fixed position of what aspirations should be (e.g. to study at university, to work in certain professions, to command a particular salary and so on) it is our responsibility to start from the individual - to get to know students as complex beings that have **"pasts and futures, habits and beliefs, emotions and identities, hopes and fears"** (Barker, and Bailey, 2015, p.42). Once we know the intricate nature of their aspirations can we influence them in positive ways. It is only then that we can implement forms of targeted support that is effective in assisting young white working-class males in carving out their *own futures*. The aim of our educational efforts should be towards developing citizens that can contribute to what I wrote here as a fair society. To reiterate, we should not be aiming to 'raise' aspirations we should be aiming to influence them, and to harness them in ways that are conducive to scientific advancement, artistic and cultural richness and social justice. These qualities hint towards what I mean here by a 'fair society'.

The argument I am putting forward here is not that teachers, and those that work with young white working class students, are inherently devoid of, nor cannot develop, their capacities to recognise student aspirations. Neither is it to say that teachers are unable to take these into account when negotiating the social landscapes in which they operate. Rather, that too often there is a lack of time, resources, and incentive for educators to understand and support the fluidity of student aspirations. It is something therefore that requires teachers and those involved in educational policy to attempt to remain conscious of when under the extreme pressures of their day-to-day job.

I appreciate my explanation of this concept of aspiration consisted of mostly abstract hyperbole. So I will conclude this talk by outline four concrete elements that will help to realise the progress that I have just called for. In doing so I hope to roughly sketch out a direction of travel, and help to frame some discussion that will no doubt take place today.

Slide 11: Sketching a way forward

It is time to bring the keynote to an abrupt end. Before I do so it is important to recognise that teachers do already practice some of these recommendation; the purpose of this slide is to explicitly identify some strategies that might help the structure how we can begin to reform our practices to effectively support students from white working class backgrounds.

(1) Community: In what Garth, and others, describe as the 'neoliberalisation of education', I have touched upon throughout these personal reflection. As a young white male growing up in Weston-super-Mare, attending the school that I did, I would describe this as a sense that community and collaboration were overshadowed by competition, individual choice and meritocracy. All of this was presented through a narrow lens what we should aspire to. This contributed to me feeling disconnected from formal education - yet even more so connected to social networks and peer groups that are so vital for learning and development.

So why not try and influence both through the power of peer learning schemes? Both aspiration and attainment can be enhanced through collaborative learning activities that educators can facilitate. There is a place for role models to contribute to sites of collaborative learning. This may be a something to reflect upon in the break out session on role models later. It is my hope that a range of meaningful masculine identities and aspirations can be promoted on this level.

(2) Interest: The curricula choices on offer to students and the core syllabus that they need to cover need to have enough flexibility so that local, and individual interests can be utilised. In Higher Education this is much easier as we are less constrained by national curriculums. But all of us in some way can be innovative in the way we engage students into subject material. We can always do better to ensure that the material that is covered in our lessons, across our programmes, and in extra curricular activities, better reflect students histories, experiences and interests. Connecting to their interests is a method of (re)connecting with white working class students.

In my case, a deep interest in sociology emerged through a realisation that things I was interested in were connected to the discipline. And my lecturers at University were very good at helping me to connect these dots *for myself.* These educational experiences had a profound effect on reshaping my aspirations - not necessarily to a 'higher set' of aspirations but still aspirations that can make a contribution to society.

(3) Pedagogy: This pertains to shifting away from a pedagogy designed to close the aspiration gap. We should not teach students what their aspirations should and could be. We should do our best to gather nuance understanding of their aspirations and then help then to

realise them. So while we need to pay more attention to the aspirations of our students we need to resist what some academics have called an aggressive focus on 'raising aspiration'.

(4)   <u>Voice:</u> When appropriate educators should help to provide a voice for students. If there are grievance, challenges or barriers your students are experience try to turn it into an educational opportunity. See if you can work with them to develop spaces where they can voice these experiences - and if you, or your school may need to speak with them, or on their behalf.