

Title Page

The Engagement and Achievement of White Working-Class
Students in an Inner London Borough

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Declaration Page

I, Emma Simpson, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The underachievement of White British pupils eligible for Free School Meals is a persistent local and national issue. Using data collected in three comprehensive schools, this research explores the factors that affect the engagement and achievement of this group in an inner London borough I call Burrington. It took a case study approach, involving a range of qualitative research tools: individual and focus group interviews with students, teachers and parents; student observation; and teachers' notes.

The research engages with Bourdieu's (1977) ideas of social reproduction and uses concepts such as capital, habitus and field. It builds on the work of others (Ball, 2008; Reay, 2017; Warin, 2010) to explore how performance pressure and funding cuts have led schools to privilege academic attainment and side-line the social and emotional aspects of learning, even whilst official ethos claims to value diversity and well-being. My findings suggest that a narrow academic ethos pathologises working-class culture and marginalises students who are not intelligible as learners, and some working-class families.

I suggest that learner identity is affected by what happens in the classroom, the impact of students' social identities, and the interaction between home and institutional habitus, and that many white working-class students have what I term 'fragile' learner identities. The current educational climate undermines teachers' abilities to implement socially just pedagogies, exacerbates conflict between students' learner and social identities and delegitimises working-class aspirations, prompting disengagement.

To explore why the attainment of white British students is more adversely affected by poverty than that of other ethnicities, I take an intersectional approach to argue that class and race intersect with a particular socio-historical position which results in missed opportunities and suffering. I also suggest that other groups may face similar difficulties, such that my findings have the potential to be applied more widely.

Impact Statement

This research project has already had an impact on practice in several schools in Burrington. After completing the fieldwork in each school, I wrote a school specific report, with recommendations, which was discussed with a member of the senior leadership team. At the end of the fieldwork, I wrote a borough report which collated findings from across the project and made five core recommendations. This was sent to all participating teachers and the head of the council's School Improvement Team. I also created a summary leaflet and a diagnostic tool to use on a one-to-one basis with students, and spoke about the research at a deputy heads' meeting.

One participating school has used the recommendations as the basis for their pupil premium action plan, convened several meetings between me and key members of staff and trialled the diagnostic tool. The senior leader responsible for these actions has reported significant impact in relation to peer relationships and career advice and guidance, both of which were areas of focus.

Another school, which did not participate in the research, has used the diagnostic tool with a range of students in need of additional support. All 20 students made significant progress in terms of engagement and attainment within two terms of use.

Several teachers who participated in the focus groups reported that their involvement had had a positive impact on their practice in relation to white working-class students. In particular, teachers noted the impact of investing more in their relationships with these students and attending to the social and emotional aspects of their learning.

The work of the School Improvement Team is guided by several strategic plans, one of which concerns White British FSM students. The recommendations from the borough report have influenced this plan and will therefore inform practice at a strategic level across schools in Burrington.

The borough report, leaflet and diagnostic tool were disseminated during the Covid-19 pandemic which reduced their immediate use. However recently, one of the participating schools which did not seem to actively respond to the recommendations, has revisited the documents, shared them with relevant members of the senior leadership team, and asked that I attend a meeting. A range of data suggests that White British FSM students have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As schools look for ways to support this group of students, more may consult and make use of the research findings.

The research also has the potential to impact practice beyond the borough, both within and outside London. I plan to disseminate the findings through academic journals, conferences and possibly a book and thereby contribute to thinking about class and race both within academia and networks of educational professionals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In England, the underachievement of White British pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) is a persistent national issue. Recent data shows that this is one of the lowest attaining FSM groups in terms of meeting early learning development goals, Attainment 8 and Progress 8¹ scores and as a percentage enrolled in Higher Education (Education Select Committee, 2021). Strand's (2015) longitudinal study showed that whilst other ethnic groups had narrowed attainment gaps over the preceding 10-15 years, White British FSM pupils continued to be the lowest achieving group. Media coverage has often emotively focused attention on the underachievement of boys in this group (B. Francis & Skelton, 2005; Gillborn, 2008; Goodwin, 2021, 2022; Weale, 2018). However, the figures show that relative to girls from other groups, White British FSM girls are underachieving just as much as boys (Education Select Committee, 2014, 2021; B. Francis & Skelton 2005).

This national picture is echoed in Burrington², the multicultural inner London borough where my research took place. Here, the attainment of White British FSM pupils is persistently 20% below the borough average and 10% below the attainment of other FSM pupils in KS2 SATs and GCSEs, which mark the end of primary school and KS4 (at 16 years old) respectively. This research thus arose from the need to understand and address a real problem. It involved qualitative data collection in three secondary schools in Burrington and used a theoretical framework influenced by Bourdieu to examine the processes of systemic marginalisation which prompt disengagement for white working-class students.

In order to set the scene, this chapter starts with an overview of the national education policy context, followed by a discussion of the discourses which surround white working-class underachievement. The second section focuses on the local context. It provides information about the borough where the fieldwork took place, the rationale for the research and the questions which shaped it. Included in this

¹ Attainment 8 and Progress 8 are national performance measures based on a student's best eight GCSE subjects. Progress 8 measures attainment at GCSE in relation to end of KS2 test scores.

² Burrington is a pseudonym

section is an explanation of my role within the borough, my interest in the topic and how I came to undertake the research. In the final section I explain the organisation of the thesis, including an outline of the methods used to investigate the research questions.

The national education policy context

Over the last 50 years, the British education system has been increasingly shaped by neoliberalism. This marketized view has led to a culture of performativity and an emphasis on the economic, rather than social, purposes of education (S. Ball, 2008/2013). An increasingly restrictive architecture of assessment, curriculum, targets, reporting and monitoring has led to new forms of regulation even as policy discourse has focused on decentralisation and school leaders' autonomy; an oxymoronic state which Ball (2008/2013) refers to as 'controlled decontrol'. The view of schools as businesses has meant a rise in the importance of management and a process of concurrent de-professionalisation and re-professionalisation as teachers and leaders are stripped of old forms of authority and conferred with new modes of power. The emulation of private enterprise is structurally enshrined in the drive towards Academisation which involves public-private partnerships in arrangements which constitute de facto privatisation of a public service (S. Ball, 2008/2013, 2018).

The ideology of meritocracy has contributed to the success and tenacity of neoliberalism (Littler, 2017) because it makes it seem as if a system driven by market forces is fair: if a school or student works hard (and thereby gathers the capitals which are valued by the market) they will succeed. This justifies a policy focus on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome: if there are high standards across the education system then everyone has a chance to attain top marks. However, this approach does not acknowledge that some people have further to travel to reach the same goals or that it is harder for some to access opportunities than others. It also ignores a central principle of neoliberal meritocracy, that of competition. If some win, others lose.

Studies repeatedly show that those with the most advantages to start with are more likely to succeed. As McNamee and Miller (2009) put it: *'the most important factor for determining where people end up economically is where they started in the first place'* (cited Littler, 2017 p.4). However, within a meritocratic paradigm, failure is the fault of the individual rather than a complex interplay of economic and structural factors. The same could be said for schools: those serving disadvantaged communities must struggle that much harder for the same results, often fall short and are blamed for it. In a high-pressure culture of performativity, to 'fail' in terms of exam results or Ofsted inspection outcome has a massive impact on the 'life chances' of the school, as well as the individuals within it.

A competitive system can therefore be seen to exacerbate inequalities. However ironically, neoliberal marketisation is often presented as the solution to intersectional injustice. Littler calls this the 'neoliberal justice narrative' and points out that

'it is often people who face significant disempowerment in terms of the extent of their resources and the range of available choices who are most intensely incited to construct a neoliberal meritocratic self' (Littler, 2017 p.70).

The emphasis is on the individual to make the 'right' choices and work hard without acknowledging that the system is rigged against those with least power.

What counts as 'right' or of value is determined by those in power. Under the coalition government (2010-2014), neoliberalism joined forces with neoconservatism when Michael Gove was appointed education secretary. The changes he made to performance measures have had long reaching consequences, particularly for 'disadvantaged' students and schools. The advent of the Ebacc measure, the removal of GCSE subjects not deemed 'real' from those that 'count' towards a school's league table position, and content heavy qualification reform has narrowed the curriculum and made socially just pedagogies less viable (S. Ball, 2008/2013; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012). That such changes were made in the name of raising standards and increasing equality of opportunity demonstrates how a 'neoliberal justice narrative' can justify choices which exacerbate rather than reduce inequality.

The educational reforms which began in the 1980s (and continued apace thereafter) have generated several problems which disproportionately affect 'disadvantaged' students, or those who are marginalised by class and/or race. Within a marketized system, pupils (and by extension families) come to have an exchange value: those who attain highly and make good progress are more desirable than those who have a negative impact on a school's league table position or Ofsted outcome (Ball, 2008/2013). This prompts a gradual shift in values as school leaders invest limited resources in strategies which promise the most direct return: setting practices which target the attainment of key grades (and appeal to middle-class parents); intervention for 'borderline' students; zero-tolerance behaviour policies; off rolling problematic students; strategic exam entry; compulsory Ebacc GCSE options; and the discontinuation of vocational courses (Ball, 2008/2013).

The shift towards valuing the economic over the social purposes of education and to seeing schools and pupils as in competition rather than collaboration, also impacts interpersonal and role relationships (Ball, 2008/2013). The social and emotional aspects of learning become side-lined, and teachers and pupils are 'managed' in order to maximise 'performance', as evidenced by performance management systems and data driven intervention schedules. The fact that the new Ofsted inspection framework (2019) emphasises the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum and includes specific focus on student and staff well-being is an implicit recognition that recent policies have had detrimental consequences. However, there are structural and ideological flaws which remain and continue to perpetuate social inequality. These can manifest as contradictory forces. Berlant (2012) coined the term '*cruel optimism*' to refer to

'the affective state produced under neoliberal culture which is cruel because it encourages an optimistic attachment to the idea of a brighter future whilst such attachments are, at the same time, 'actively impeded' by the harsh precarities and instabilities of neoliberalism' (cited Littler, 2018 p.90).

The paradox of lamenting people to do better in a system rigged against them, or rich white people blaming multiculturalism for white working-class underachievement

when wealth inequality is the issue (see discourse perpetuated by The Telegraph and discussed later in this chapter), is symptomatic of a system which cannot see its own flaws. The way in which neoliberalism has affected education (and other aspects of society) is deeply implicated in the challenges faced by white working-class students. However, easier targets for blame such as low aspirations or immigration are more often invoked. I turn now therefore to consider the discourses which surround white working-class students and how my research is positioned in relation to them. This is prefaced by a brief note on terminology.

Terminology

I have chosen to use the term 'white working-class' in the title and body of this thesis because it refers to the broad section of society in which I am interested and because its use is supported by much of the literature. I recognise that White British FSM students are a subset of this larger group. However, I have referred to attainment data of this subgroup and used these categories as selection criteria for participation in my research for pragmatic reasons. Whilst not all working-class people are economically disadvantaged, there is a correlation between class and income in many social classification systems, such as those based on occupation or home ownership (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). In an educational context, FSM eligibility indicates economic disadvantage and is an easily accessible data set. It is therefore useful as a crude marker of social class even though there are many working-class pupils who are not FSM. The ethnic code 'White British' encompasses the most privileged as well as some of the least privileged students in society. It is therefore important to disaggregate data for this group, otherwise the underachievement of poorer students is masked by the overachievement of richer students. Analysis by FSM status shows up stark inequalities because it compares the attainment of the most economically disadvantaged pupils with the rest. However, there are students not eligible for FSM with a similar socioeconomic profile who are similarly affected by poverty, class and structural discrimination. My research speaks to this wider group even as it uses narrow criteria to illustrate the problem and select participants. As explained below, the performance of this subgroup also has an impact on how the larger group is perceived.

Policy documents from the 2010s use the term 'disadvantaged' to refer to FSM pupils. For this reason, council managers requested that I use 'White British Disadvantaged' in school facing documentation. However, I have chosen not to use it elsewhere because I believe it implies deficit beyond the economic sphere. The term 'race' is also contentious. I am aware that it is a social construct, however I use it without quotation marks because I do not want to focus attention on debates which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

White working-class underachievement: the discourses in circulation

Various discourses surround the issue of white working-class underachievement and have served to shape public imagination and policy response. The first is the idea of the white working-class as victims, often framed as losing out to multiculturalism. The second attributes the problem to deficiencies in white working-class culture and people. The third sees their underachievement as symptomatic of wider structural inequalities which impact on working-class groups of other ethnicities as well. Finally, there are those who focus on the historically situated intersectional position of this group.

The white working-class as victims

The New Labour focus on the white working-class in the 2000s resulted in this group being emotively framed as in competition with ethnic minorities in the fields of education, employment and social services such as housing and health care. Gillborn (2008) explains how responses to their underachievement are inflamed by a process of discursive slippage whereby the educational attainment of White British FSM pupils (13% of the population) is presented as that of the white working-class as a whole (roughly 57% of the population, according to self-identifying classification). Whole swathes of society are thereby tarred with the brush of failure. Where the fault is attributed determines whether such people are perceived as victims or degenerates, either of which serves to recentre the interests of white people (Gillborn, 2012; Mondon & Winter, 2019).

However, as Sveinsson (2009) points out in his introduction to a collection of papers for Runnymede entitled 'Who cares about the white working-class?', White British FSM pupils are losing out to wealth rather than ethnicity. Gillborn (2008) and Strand (2015) show that there are greater disparities between FSM and non-FSM pupils than between FSM groups of different ethnicities. In other words, poverty is a greater determinant of educational success than ethnicity. This is supported by data which starkly shows the correlation between parental income and educational outcome (Gorard, 2010; Reay, 2017). The idea that the white working-class are victims of multiculturalism is thus a potent fallacy which feeds nationalist and racist polemics but is not upheld by fact.

The authors of the Runnymede (2009) report, Keddie (2015), Reay (2017) and others argue that there is more that unites than divides working-class people of different ethnicities and that there is a need to tackle broader structural inequalities which support class hierarchies. However, academics such as Charlesworth (1999) and Reay (2006) suggest that there is resistance to talking about class, perhaps because it is not as visible as characteristics such as race or gender (Smith, 2005 cited Mongon, 2008 p.18) or because its presence belies the failure of the meritocratic promise.

Class discrimination is rife in English society (O. Jones, 2012) and could be said to work as insidiously as the hub and spoke conspiracy identified by Gillborn (2008) in relation to race. Like racism, classism can also be said to be a *'fundamental, organizing principle of the contemporary education system'* (Gillborn, 2008 p.245) and give rise to patterns of *'locked-in inequality'* (Roithmayr, 2003 cited Gillborn, 2008 p.238). This is exemplified by the mechanisms of social reproduction analysed by Bourdieu and presented Chapter 2, in the school practices and processes documented in Chapters 5-8, and in patterns of inequality analysed in recent reports (Farquharson, 2022) as well as in decades of research in sociology of education.

The trope of the white working-class as victims is persistent, as evidenced by the title of the 2021 Select Committee report: *'The Forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it'*. But if so, they are victims of classism

rather than multiculturalism. As Gillborn (2012) points out, the system can discriminate on the basis of class and race at the same time. The white working-class are often used to protect the interests of those in power whether positioned within a discourse of victimhood (to deflect attention away from racism) or degeneracy (which is imbued with class prejudice).

The white working class as deficient

The second discourse, of deficiency, positions white working-class culture as the barrier to educational engagement and achievement. Such studies and reports find fault with the parenting practices of white working-class families (Education Select Committee, 2014; Demie, 2010a, 2010b; Plowden, 1967) and suggest that it is their low aspirations and failure to engage with school which results in their children's underachievement. This perspective gives rise to the 'raising aspirations' discourse and associated initiatives such as 'Aim Higher' (2004) and 'The Extra Mile' (2008) which seek to raise aspirations by broadening students' horizons and encouraging participation in higher education.

However, many academics have challenged the assumptions underlying this discourse, as I will explore in more detail in Chapter 3. Francis and Perry (2010) summarise this position when they write:

'the projection of 'deficits' onto working-class young people and their families has the potential to stigmatise these individuals, and conveniently focuses on individual problems rather than institutional, financial or societal explanations'
(Francis and Perry, 2010 p.6)

This invokes both the neoliberal emphasis on the individual (S. Ball, 2008/2013; K. Jones, 2003), and the demonisation of the white working-class documented by Gillborn (2010) and O. Jones (2012). Such deficit thinking also ignores a long history of working-class intellectuals' efforts to critically engage with state education and to forge alternative educational spaces which meet their needs rather than the needs of those in power (Johnson in Clarke, Critcher, & Johnson, 1979; Rose, 2021). Such movements have been disempowered by the erosion of working-class employment rights and a *'contemporary education system [which] discourages free and*

independent thought' (Reay, 2017, p.26). However, the latter constitute structural impediments rather than the failure of working-class culture.

Francis and Perry, like Reay, critique a perspective which finds fault in cultural practices rather than the system which produces and judges the situations in which working-class people find themselves. This perspective constitutes the third discourse surrounding white working-class underachievement.

Structural inequalities

Reay writes extensively (2001, 2017; 2009) about the need for a more nuanced understanding of and response to working-class underachievement, including that of the white working-class. Along with others such as Gillborn (2000), Evans (2006), Ingram (2009) and Francis and Perry (2010) she argues that there are structural and cultural problems within the education system which perpetuate working-class disadvantage. This argument builds on a long history of class-focused analysis which has explored the reproductive nature of the education system in England (S. Ball, 1981; Bernstein, 1971; Willis, 1978). The key issues identified by Reay include a fundamental lack of respect for working-class people and culture; mechanisms of segregation within and between schools which favour the middle-class and consolidate a sense of failure for working-class children; pedagogic practices which limit agency instead of promoting critical thinking; and a devaluing of vocational pathways.

There are also structural issues beyond the field of education which are linked to underachievement. Bottero (in Sveinsson, 2009) identifies long-term shifts in economic structure and political policy as root problems:

'We should look at the impact of the closure of the manufacturing industries which once dominated working-class communities; the neo-liberal de-regulation of the labour market which has made their jobs less secure; the sponsoring of middle-class advantage through 'parental choice' of schools and the marketization of education; the sell-off of council housing which concentrates the most disadvantaged in the remaining estates; and the

stalling of incomes and expenditure at the bottom of society whilst the wealth of the rich rockets' (Bottero, 2009 p.8)

More recent developments such as the rise of zero-hour contracts, a sustained period of austerity and precarity and the current cost of living crisis could be added to this list.

Given the established link between parental income and educational outcome in Britain, factors which impact employment and economic capital, such as those cited above, are necessarily implicated in attainment. The question which follows is why the educational experience of White British FSM pupils seems to be more adversely affected by poverty than that of other ethnic groups with similar economic profiles (Strand 2015). This leads me to the issue of the specific intersectional position of white working-class young people in education.

The intersectional position of the white working-class

Like any group, the white working-class occupy a particular intersectional historical position which manifests in specific ways. Their identity as white is inflected by their class position and the historical period through which they have lived. Reay (2017) distinguishes their experience when she writes:

'the white working classes have a different relationship to education to that of many BME working class groups. While the white working class often bring a collective memory of educational subordination and marginalisation to schooling, some BME groups in the global North bring histories of educational achievement in their countries of origin, although migration has often brought economic impoverishment and downward mobility' (Reay, 2017 p.153)

This different relationship to education is important and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, in the context of the stratification of society which gave rise to it. The history of employment for white working-class groups, as documented in sociological research, is closely linked: Charlesworth's (1999) intense ethnography of a white working-class community in Rotherham (South Yorkshire) traces the

effects of the closure of manufacturing industries and demise of trade union power on the physical and mental health of his participants. He explains:

'They are the zombies that British culture has created by condemning them to the living death of a stigmatized, abject being' (Charlesworth, 1999 p.160).

He presents the people he interviews as silenced, depressed, disaffected and unmoored by systemic unemployment. Where before they were bound by rhythms of work which gave a sense of dignity and value, now they share a collective decline which is experienced as personal fate. When *'hard work and education seem to lead nowhere'* (p.5), aspirations and investment in education are necessarily reduced. This is echoed by Evans's (2006) East London ethnography which makes similar links between changes in employment patterns, a rise in drug and alcohol abuse and disaffection with education. She is particularly struck by the misfit between white working-class masculinities and the school system. This is a theme picked up by other academics such as Reay (2002), Francis and Skelton (2005), Ingram (2009), Stahl (2017) and Travers (2017) and will be discussed in relation to the gendered nature of social and learner identities in Chapters 6 and 8. Evans' ethnography both illustrates and challenges the deficit discourse. She notes that the language used to talk about the lower classes is littered with associations with dirt and connects this to the status of 'cleanliness' as a sign of 'making good'. The importance of moving up the social ladder is symptomatic of meritocracy's promise. However, she also documents the difficulties that children from even supportive, stable working-class homes have within the school system. This challenges the deficit discourse by breaking the correlation between dysfunctional homelife and poor school performance and shows the structural difficulties faced by families doing their best, failing and suffering as if it were personal failure. She also shows how heavy curriculum demands make committed teachers feel like failures as they struggle to engage pupils whose needs and interests are not met.

The deficit and victim discourse are both supported by neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism valorises the individual and therefore sees deficiencies within white working-class families as the cause of educational underachievement. It also regards competition as necessary which lends itself to the idea that the white working-class are losing out to ethnic minorities. What it does not see is the deeper structural

problems it has created which are themselves critical causes. My research is interested in this structural perspective and how issues are inflected by the specific intersectional position of white working-class students. Exposing the deeper forces at work also serves to discredit the victim and deficit discourses which have such an affective presence in policy and the public imagination, for example in the denigration of funding for minority attainment (Goodwin, 2022) and in teachers' perceptions of white working-class children (A. Bradbury, 2013).

Like Charlesworth's, Evans' work documents the impact that wider social change has on an area and its people. This was due to deindustrialisation in Rotherham and a combination of changing employment patterns and gentrification in the Docklands. In a similar vein, I turn now to outline the wider social changes in Burrington in order to contextualise the challenges faced by the white working-class students in my study.

The local context

Like many inner London boroughs, Burrington has been through a process of gentrification over the last 50 years. In the 1970s the streets of Georgian and Victorian terraced houses, interspersed with post-war housing estates, were often in poor condition and/or divided into multiple tenancies. Many were social housing, owned by the council. Indeed, at least one area of terraced houses was in such poor condition that it was pulled down as part of slum clearance. The houses were replaced with a 1960s brutalist housing estate with concrete walkways and stairwells, which created a new physical infrastructure for social problems and provided a net gain of one dwelling.

The population of Burrington in the 1970s was majority white British working-class though with significant Black Caribbean, Asian and Cypriot communities (Government, 1977). There was also a left-wing bohemian and political activist presence. The abundance of pubs which are there today were extant but besides from many 'corner shops', the odd DIY shop and sparsely placed small supermarkets, there were few commercial outlets. There were however several vibrant street

markets selling fruit and vegetables, flowers, household items, clothing and furniture. These local businesses provided employment. Working-class people also worked in trades such as plumbing, gas and electrical services, construction, distribution and catering and for national organisations such as the postal service and London transport (Government, 1981).

The physical distribution of schools is similar today as it was then with around 55 primary schools, 10 secondary schools and one post-16 college. In the 1970s all were state maintained, and some were church schools. Most local children attended these schools with a minority of pupils travelling to private provision.

Today, 50 years later, the picture is very different. Burrington is a thriving destination for restaurants, bars, entertainment and retail. Terraced houses sell for over a million pounds, often to people who work in the city or one of the highly paid knowledge economy occupations which have burgeoned in recent years. The differences between rich and poor are stark and even though they live in close proximity, there are clear spatial divisions: the streets with expensive boutiques and restaurants are frequented by the rich whilst adventure playgrounds and public leisure facilities are majority working-class; there are gastropubs for the middle class and unrenovated or chain pubs for the working-class.

The Right to Buy scheme introduced by Thatcher in the 1980s contributed to these changes. Many council-owned terraced houses entered the private market and have been passed on for ever increasing prices to those who can afford them. A combination of council funding cuts and a growing housing development market has also meant that private companies have bought and redeveloped housing estates with most sold on the open market and a minority retained for social housing.

Such changes have affected the population and created a socially divided borough. Recent data shows that 48% of Burrington's population have a university degree whilst 46% live in high density social housing. It has been classified as the sixth most deprived borough in London at the same time as there are houses which cost over five million pounds. 28% of children live in income deprived families (the highest percentage in London and 10th highest in England). It has the highest proportion of

working age population claiming sickness and disability benefits in London, of which 55% give mental ill health as the main reason (council statistics).

The borough is more multicultural than it was before but with more white Europeans (professional and working-class) and fewer white British working-class. There is now a significant Black African community and a smaller Black Caribbean community, similar numbers of Cypriot and Asian people and growing populations of Syrian, Afghan and Ukrainian people. Black and ethnic minority people (33% of the borough population) tend to belong to the poorer half of the borough, along with the white working-class, whilst the professional Europeans have joined the (mostly white) middle and upper classes in the richer half.

The secondary schools bear the marks of this inequality and social division. Whilst many (but not all) primary schools have a diverse intake in terms of both class and race, the secondary schools predominantly serve the poorer half of the borough. The children from richer households more often attend private schools or strategically obtain a secondary place elsewhere. There is therefore a different demographic in Burrington primary and secondary schools. Many of the latter have a higher proportion of FSM and ethnic minority students and have to work hard to attract middle-class parents.

30% of the total school population is White British, with 8% classified as White British FSM. The latter are the lowest achieving group in terms of attainment and progress in both phases with gaps widening through secondary school. This group is overrepresented in alternative provision, elective home education and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) figures. Such data suggests that the school system is not serving these students effectively.

The origins of my research project

My research arose from this reality and from a professional and personal interest in the topic. For the last 13 years I have worked as an educational consultant in the council school improvement team. My subject specialism is English and I run termly

network meetings for faculty leaders which are tailored to their needs. In 2014, a Head of English raised the issue of white working-class underachievement. Over the next few years, I researched the issue, presented the findings, organised an equalities conference which focused on White British FSM and Black Caribbean students (the other lowest performing group) and ran follow up workshops. These actions raised awareness at both school and council level and prompted action plans, a scrutiny committee and a reference group which has kept the two groups at the forefront of strategic work.

During this time the idea of further research in the form of a PhD grew and the council agreed to fund two thirds of the fees in return for dissemination of findings. In my work across ten schools, I had become increasingly interested in how the ethos or culture of a school shapes the educational experience of pupils and how some demographic groups seemed to do better in one school than another. I noticed different uses of language in the signage around schools, the way teachers spoke to students and in the pedagogies used. I became interested in how national policies were enacted differently from school to school, as well as in the way they prompted similar interpretations and directions of travel. I thought about the unintended consequences or 'collateral damage' which resulted from strategic decisions prompted by national policy. For example, the segregation caused by setting and targeted intervention, its effects on students in lower sets, and the trade-off schools felt they had to make in order to secure optimal exam results and attract/retain middle-class families.

The workshops I ran had raised the issue of role models. Teachers with white working-class origins spoke out and we discussed the matter of visibility and identity: many had become middle-class in the process of acquiring their profession and were now invisible as role models in a way that ethnic minority teachers were not, regardless of social background. I became interested in the extent to which it was possible for a white working-class student to succeed academically at the same time as retain their working-class identity and the ways in which prevalent discourses about aspirations (endorsed by schools) framed working-classness as something to escape. The factual state of underachievement, a review of the existing literature, and these thoughts gave rise to the following research questions:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values and ethos of three secondary schools in Burrington and how are they conveyed?
2. How do these values and ethos interact with white working-class identities and experiences of school?
3. What are the prevailing pedagogic practices in each school and how are they experienced by white working-class students?

As well as the professional interest in white working-class engagement and achievement outlined above, I also have a personal interest. I have lived through the gentrification of Burrington and it is the borough in which I now both work and live. When I cycle from school to school as part of my job, or walk around with my son, the streets are a palimpsest of significance.

I was born in 1975 to a professional (research scientist) single mother who had bought a terraced house in Burrington in the 1960s. She let out rooms to make ends meet, returned to work full time when I was six weeks old and employed a local white working-class family to take care of me. I therefore grew up in two worlds: one foot in a middle-class (but somewhat unconventional) habitus frequented by academics, artists and foreign travel and the other in a conventional working-class habitus with stay-at-home mother, plumber father and two surrogate sisters with whom I played on the council estate. My accent shifted unconsciously in response to who I was with. Our families were close and there was a high level of reciprocity and dialogue. The father was employed, along with his twin brother, when anything in our house needed attention. The eldest daughter had piano lessons together with me. The family took me along on a caravan holiday. The adults consulted each other in times of need. I went to a local primary school where my closest friends ranged from bohemian middle class, through aspiring working-class to disadvantaged working-class (all white).

Yet those worlds grew apart when I left the childminder and started (supported by a bursary) at an academically selective private secondary school. The culture shock was profound, but the quality of teachers and education was very good. At a primary school reunion 13 years later, I was the only person who had had a positive

experience of secondary school, though most had found a path and job they seemed happy with.

As a newly qualified teacher I worked for three years in the local secondary school my childminders' children and several of my peers had attended. It was chaotic and difficult, but relationships between teachers and students (and their families) were strong. In this job and subsequent ones, I often found myself drawn to and advocating for white working-class students – a rapport and commitment perhaps born of my formative years and the social injustices they had enabled me to perceive.

According to examination results and Ofsted outcomes, Burrington schools (for the most part) provide a better quality of education than in my childhood and when I was a young teacher. There are more standardised schemes of work and pedagogical approaches, and more policies and structures. But I wonder at what cost and for whom. I believe in the importance of school improvement but am worried by the forces and values that often seem to drive it. I know that education makes a difference to a person's life chances but also that it is only one influence among many. I am worried and angered by the responsibility and blame put on schools and teachers by politicians who are unwilling to address less convenient aspects of society, such as the enormous wealth gaps swollen by neoliberalism. I believe school should prepare students for adult life by both engaging with their economic and creative potential and by nurturing their growth as social and emotional individuals but feel that the latter aspects are neglected within the current system. I think white working-class students should be able to do as well as their peers without losing their working-class identity but that a systemic lack of respect for working-class life makes this difficult.

My research came from a desire to understand the factors that affect the engagement and achievement of white working-class students in order to give schools practical ways to improve the educational experiences of these students. In the process I have perceived deeper structural and ideological root problems that are important to surface in order to positively impact both this group of students and others affected by marginalisation. This research builds on and provides further

evidence to support the work of many other academics. I hope it also makes an original contribution to the field by providing detailed access to the lived implications of the current educational landscape for a social group which is both at a specific intersectional position and representative of the challenges others face.

The organisation of the thesis

The work of Bourdieu forms the theoretical framework for this research and is the focus of the next chapter. Here I explain the key conceptual tools employed: the three interrelated concepts of capital, habitus and field and the notion of misrecognition, symbolic violence, doxa and hysteresis. I explore how these tools have been applied by other academics within the field of education and how they enable us to see the ways in which education functions as site for social reproduction.

Chapter 3 is a review of the literature. It begins with a discussion of the intertwined nature of class and race and an historical account of the educational landscape, particularly in relation to the white working-class. It then reviews the literature relevant to my research: what has been thought and researched in relation to school ethos, pedagogy, social and learner identities, home-school relationships and aspirations and so sets the scene for later chapters which draw on this knowledge. It also identifies the lack of research on the impact of schools' value and ethos, and pedagogic practices, on white working-class students, which this research rectifies.

Chapter 4 focuses on methodology. This chapter explains how I took a qualitative, case study approach which involved three secondary schools and a selection of pupils, teachers and parents. I used various tools to investigate the research questions, such as focus groups, interviews and observation. In this chapter I explain the choice of these tools and how they were used, the selection criteria and process for the schools and participants therein, and how I analysed the data. I also explore the ethical issues raised and engage reflexively with my position as a researcher.

Chapters 5-8 present an analysis of my findings. Chapter 5 concerns school ethos and its impact on white working-class students and their families. I explore the discrepancies between official and felt ethos and how ethos can be used as a mechanism to promote conformity or a way to empower students. Within this discussion is an account of how students can be unwittingly marginalised by systems and values but also how school ethos can increase a sense of belonging.

The focus of Chapter 6 is relationships: those between staff and students, between peers and between the school and home. I demonstrate the critical nature of all types of relationship, how the current educational landscape functions to side-line the social and emotional aspects of learning to the detriment of white working-class (and other) students, and the gendered nature of some of the challenges faced by students.

Chapters 7 and 8 are both about learner identity, that is, how a student feels about themselves as a learner. I note the prevalence of what I call a fragile learner identity in the white working-class students in my sample and suggest that a student's learner identity is impacted by three layers of influence: what happens in the classroom, their social identity and the role that school-based learning has in their life beyond school.

Chapter 7 explores the impact of the first layer: what happens in the classroom. It presents an analysis of the pedagogies and conditions which help students and those which prompt disengagement. The chapter is split into two sections: one about feeling safe and the other about how students can be supported (or not) to take responsibility for their learning. It builds on findings presented in Chapter 6 about student-teacher and peer relationships.

Chapter 8 concerns the second two layers of influence. It extends the discussion of peer relationships to examine how both boys and girls navigate conflict between their social and learner identities. It also picks up on the findings presented in Chapter 4 to explore how school ethos can contribute to an opposition between learner and social identities for marginalised groups and how teacher perception is implicated in such processes. The second section of this chapter concerns the third layer of

influence and engages with discourses of aspiration. I examine how assumptions based on flawed meritocratic ideology can lead to a privileging of academic routes in ways which devalue working-class culture and make school seem less relevant for some white working-class students. The interaction between school and home habitus links to comments made in Chapter 5 about school ethos and those made in Chapter 6 about home-school relationships. The four analysis chapters therefore work together recursively to create a picture of how schools can unwittingly marginalise white working-class students but also how some practices can mitigate against structural discrimination.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I return to the research questions, offer a summary of my findings and use Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis to suggest why white working-class students seem to be more adversely affected by poverty than other ethnic groups. I go on to explain how the findings have been disseminated and received and the real-world impact to date, as well as the limitations of the study and ideas for future research. I close with a summary of my contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Bourdieu's conceptual tools of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* provide a useful way of exploring how the current educational system disadvantages white working-class students. In this chapter I will set out my understanding of each of these key terms, how they have been used in academic research and their relevance to my study. Their interlocking nature makes it difficult to write about one without reference to the others. My approach is to define them sequentially and limit use of each term until it has been covered.

Misrecognition, *symbolic violence*, *doxa*, and *hysteresis*, are also valuable concepts for making sense of the lived experience of these students and will be explained and illustrated. Bourdieu's notion of *reflexivity* is important to the processes of research design and data interpretation and will be addressed in the methodology chapter instead of here.

I start with a definition of capital and its central role in education. Within this section I also define misrecognition and symbolic violence and explain the way they work to legitimate the practices of dominant groups, as explored by academics such as Ingram (2009), Kulz (2017) and Reay (2017). I go on to illustrate the flexibility of capital as a concept and the way it has been extended by academics such as Skeggs (1997), Archer (2015) and Travers (2017) to investigate processes of transubstantiation – the transformation of one form of capital into another. With reference to the work of these three academics (and others) I argue that capital, as a conceptual tool, can be used to show how working-class students are disadvantaged both in their journey through education and into employment.

In the second section I define habitus and its relationship to capital with reference to Archer's (2012) work on science capital. I explain the links between habitus and aspirations explored by Willis (1978), Reay (2001, 2005), Archer (2012; 2007) and Hoskins and Barker (2017) and move on to explore the interaction between family and institutional habitus which is a focus in the work of Lareau (2003/2011), Ingram

(2009) and Stahl (2013). At this point I refer to the debate about the legitimacy of the terms family habitus and institutional habitus (Atkinson, 2011) and introduce Bourdieu's notion of doxa. With reference to Atkinson (2011) I justify why I use doxa in my discussion of school ethos but follow Reay (1998), Ingram (2009) and Stahl (2013) in my use of institutional habitus to explore the alignment between a student's home and school lives.

Habitus is always in relation to field. In the third section I define field and explore the implications of a habitus-field mismatch as discussed by Stahl (2013) and Reay (2021). The psychosocial burden which students carry in their attempts to reconcile academic demands and acceptance into a working-class peer group has been discussed in the work of Reay (2002), Evans (2006), Warin (2010) and Stahl (2013). I cite the term 'identity capital' coined by Warin (2010) and similar conceptions by Reay (2009) and Stahl (2013) to illustrate how symbolic capitals are again involved in students' navigation of the field of school.

I introduce the final term, hysteresis, as one which Bourdieu uses to explore the effects of a disjunction between habitus and field. I explain how he uses it in both an early (1977b) and late (1999) work in the context of a change in field over time. I then show how Chen (2020) employs the hysteresis effect more recently to explore the suffering caused by the double disjuncture experienced by Chinese rural students attending urban universities. Both these applications illustrate why it is a useful term for me in my study of white working-class students and their relationships to education.

Whilst the context in which Bourdieu was writing was different in many ways there are similarities which make his tools directly applicable and ways in which they can be modified for modern analysis. In the penultimate section of this chapter, I address some of the limitations of Bourdieu's work (one of which is the issue of race) and offer a response to these critiques.

In the final section I explain how I theorise whiteness in the context of this research. I discuss some of the debates which surround whiteness with reference to the work of Gillborn (2008, 2012), Jones (2012) and the academics who contributed to the 2009 Runnymede Trust report on the white working-class. I explain that my primary focus

is class and that race, like gender, is read as one of several identity markers within an intersectional approach.

Capital, misrecognition and symbolic violence

Capital is a way of referring to and talking about the resources or power that people have in society. Bourdieu makes a distinction between economic (monetary) and symbolic capital. The latter comprises resources whose value is dependent on what they represent within a particular field and their power to confer social advantage. Economic capital is central, but analysis of symbolic forms is equally important to an understanding of how people navigate social space. The students in my study are classified as pupil premium which means they have less economic capital than their peers. Their share of symbolic capital is impacted by economic status such that both forms of capital shape educational experience.

Cultural capital is an example of symbolic capital which is particularly relevant to my study. It signifies the types of cultural knowledge which are legitimated by dominant social groups. According to Bourdieu, what is regarded as 'worth knowing' or 'high quality' is arbitrary but is presented and understood as having an essential value. The term *misrecognition* denotes this false perception of the true nature of symbolic capital. For example, classical music is misrecognised as musically superior to reggae whereas its value is conferred by its legitimated position within a social structure delineated by power relations; in a different social structure, it would have different value.

The education system deals in cultural capital in that it is designed to inculcate students with knowledge, tastes, and ways of seeing which are valued by dominant social groups – the middle and upper classes. Although these can be explicitly taught through the curriculum, the upbringing of students from the dominant groups has already imbued them with cultural capital as part of their social inheritance. As I will discuss later, it is part of their habitus. They are therefore at an advantage. The education system purports to be meritocratic and a means by which to reduce social inequality but the capitals in which it deals inherently advantage some students and

disadvantage others. As Willis states with reference to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970):

'educational advantage is controlled through the 'fair' meritocratic testing of precisely those skills which 'cultural capital' provides' (Willis, 1977 p.128)

Academics from Willis (1977) to Reay (2021) have explored the ways in which the education system perpetuates social inequality through rewarding the cultural capital of dominant groups and misrecognising that of lower classes. The belief that symbolic capitals have intrinsic rather than arbitrary value is a form of misrecognition which results in symbolic violence on those who are subjected to the imposition of dominant culture. Symbolic violence is insidious, it is *'the gentle, invisible form of violence'* (Bourdieu, 1977 p.192) and refers to the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by a dominant group. Kulz (2017) uses the concepts of symbolic violence, misrecognition and capital to investigate how a prestigious academy marginalises pupils who do not conform to its strictures. She shows how impressive exam results mask an institution which holds a deficit view of the working-class and punishes symbolic markers of culture such as hairstyle and food consumption.

In doing so she builds on the work of Vincent (2001) and Lareau (2003/2011) who explore the correlation between parents' (legitimated) cultural capital and their confidence in navigating interactions with school. Just as Kulz demonstrates how students are differentially treated, Vincent and Lareau show how parenting practices associated with the middle class are normalised by the education system such that those who operate according to a different cultural logic are judged pejoratively. These dynamics can undermine trust and engagement and widen inequality; a theme which is picked up by my research.

Bourdieu's concept of capital is thus an important tool to analyse subtle processes of social reproduction. It is also a flexible tool which can be expanded and adapted. In Skeggs's (1997) examination of how class is ascribed, positioned and challenged by working-class women, she uses the term 'corporeal capital' to denote investment in appearance as one of several of capitals available, or not available, to her participants. Archer et al. (2007) build on this idea in their discussion of working-class girls' use of heterosexual femininities to construct capital and the paradoxical

way that this can play into oppressive power relations. In doing so they reinforce Skeggs's argument that feminine capital (of which corporeal capital is one aspect) can be manipulated to serve patriarchal structures.

Another example of the flexibility of capital as a thinking tool is Archer's coinage of 'science capital' (2015) to analyse how experiences and conceptions of science in the home can produce a form of capital which influences pupils' propensity to pursue a career in science. As with other forms of capital, this is a classed practice and contributes to social reproduction. Travers (2017) likewise uses the discipline-specific 'sporting capital' to explain a strategy whereby white working-class boys turn a form of capital valued by their peers into one valued by the education system when they gain qualifications in sports science.

Bourdieu makes the point that all forms of symbolic capital are transubstantiated forms of economic capital. Skeggs (1997), Archer (2015) and Travers (2017) are all interested in this process of transforming one form of capital (feminine, science or sporting) into institutional capital (academic qualifications) which helps to secure economic capital (a job). Academic qualifications are an important form of symbolic capital which are explicitly linked to the promise of economic capital. However, as their work shows and as I explore in my research, the system works to disadvantage working-class students at both stages of this transformation.

As discussed above and demonstrated by Willis (1977), Lareau (2003/2011), Archer (2015), Reay (2017) and others, disadvantage occurs in the first move from cultural to institutional capital because it is more difficult for working-class students to secure academic qualifications which implicitly test the cultural capital associated with the middle class. However working-class students are also disadvantaged in the second stage of transformation, from institutional to economic capital. This happens in three main ways.

The first is because of the processes and implications of qualification inflation which Bourdieu details in *Distinction* (1984/2010) and which are illustrated through Travers's study (2017). Ironically, the drive to increase the take up of higher education has caused a type of inflation such that an undergraduate degree no

longer guarantees a 'good job' (Hopper, 2014; Reay, 2021). Bourdieu drew a parallel between cultural and economic capital when he wrote:

'academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1977 p.187)

Just as an influx of money causes each unit to lose value, the increase in undergraduate degrees means that each one is worth less than in the past, even though more jobs require them. Higher education is thus simultaneously more and less valuable. Although the academically successful white working-class young men in Travers's study (2017) go to university, the increasing layers of distinction which arise in response to qualification inflation mean that the type of university and course have different symbolic value in the job market; those who attend non-Russell group universities and take courses such as sports science have a less secure economic outlook than those at elite universities studying more 'academic' degrees.

Secondly, success at university and in the subsequent job market is dependent on a range of symbolic capitals beyond entry qualifications. An important example is social capital, by which is meant relationships and shared norms and values which enable a person to benefit from their connection with others. The students in Travers's study (2017) who attended elite universities were provided with opportunities to develop social capital alongside disciplinary knowledge which helped them to secure employment. However, when they first arrived their lack of relevant social capital contributed to feelings of not 'fitting in'. The ways in which differences in social capital (and habitus) disadvantage working-class students in education and the process of securing employment is discussed by Walkerdine et al (2001) and Reay (2017, 2021) in their explorations of the psychosocial aspects of class discrimination.

Social capital influences aspirations and therefore is implicated in the process of turning school level qualifications into economic capital. As I will discuss further in the next section, aspirations are shaped by habitus (L. Archer et al., 2007) and the jobs of people with whom a student has social contact (Hoskins & Barker, 2017). Not only does this exposure provide ideas of what is possible and desirable, such

contact generates social capital; insider information about how the field works and access to work experience.

The social capital of working-class students and their families may help them to secure jobs associated with the working class. However, unlike the ways in which middle-class values and aspirations are reinforced by congruence between home and school (Warin, 2010), there is often a disjunct between the professions valued by home and school for working-class pupils. This constitutes the third way which makes it more difficult for working-class students to turn institutional capital into economic capital: the privileging of academic pathways and concurrent lack of attention to, and devaluing of, vocational routes.

In Willis's study (1977) the misrecognition of working-class culture alienates 'the lads' who intend to follow their fathers into manual labour and do not see the relevance of school to their lives beyond it. Willis sees the counter-culture they adopt as a form of resistance to the symbolic violence of a system which asserts the myth of meritocracy. He reads their behaviour as a refusal to play a game in which they perceive their own disadvantage:

'The refusal to compete, implicit in the counter-school culture, is therefore in this sense a radical act: it refuses to collude in its own educational suppression' (Willis, 1977 p.128)

They recognise that the examination system rewards the type of cultural capital they do not have. They also feel that their working-class culture and career trajectory is judged pejoratively by school staff. Whilst the boundaries between types of jobs have become more blurred, hierarchies persist and are felt (Bourdieu, 1984/2010).

Since 1977 when Willis was writing, changes in employment patterns mean basic literacy and numeracy skills are required for more jobs than in the past and those who leave school without some qualifications are at high risk of unemployment (Bottero in Sveinsson, 2009). Academic qualifications have therefore become relevant for all students, whether they pursue an academic or vocational post-16 pathway. However, the status and provision of vocational routes remains

problematic. The young women in Skegg's community care study (1997) left school without qualifications. As adults they take up a vocational course as a means by which to secure employment and respectability. Skeggs explores the practical and psychological advantages of this strategy as well as the ways in which it reinforces dominant power relations. In doing so she draws attention to the differential value attributed to different forms of capital and the ways in which processes of legitimation and transubstantiation are deeply implicated in the reproduction of class relations.

The privileging of academic pathways means that schools often do not engage with or prepare students for occupations associated with the working-class, such as becoming a plumber or electrician. However, the system also does not take enough account of the host of symbolic capitals which students need to navigate a non-working-class route, or the fragility of the promise that academic capital (in the form of an undergraduate degree) will secure economic capital. The current school system therefore neither prepares working-class students adequately for working-class or middle-class pathways. It neither accords respect to working-class culture nor perceives that it is engaged in a process of forced acculturation into middle-class culture. As Willis (1997), Reay (2017) and Kulz (2017) demonstrate, and as I discuss in relation to my research, this form of symbolic violence has an impact on how working-class students engage with school.

Bourdieu's concept of capital thus provides part of a framework through which to understand how white working-class students are disadvantaged by the education system. As Moore puts it, with reference to the concept of field:

'Capital can be understood as the "energy" that drives the development of a field through time. Capital in action is the enactment of the principle of the field.' (Moore in Grenfell, 2014, p. 102)

The cultural capital required to gain institutional capital (qualifications) is one challenge. The capacity to turn institutional capital into economic capital is another. The latter transformation involves several separate and interlinked obstacles: the implications of qualification inflation; feeling fully equipped to navigate the field of higher education; trusting that the system supports and validates pathways which do

not involve university; seeing the relevance of institutional capital to economic capital in a way which inspires motivation to achieve academically regardless of pathway.

Cultural capital is the currency of the educational field and yet its acquisition is closely related to habitus. I turn now therefore to a definition of habitus and illustration of its use.

Habitus and doxa

Habitus is a set of dispositions which are formed first in the home and are subsequently influenced by other significant social spaces in our lives, such as education. Maton provides a useful definition:

‘Simply put, habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others.’ (Maton in Grenfell, 2014, p. 51)

This quotation gestures towards the way in which habitus both shapes how we are and is shaped by our experiences. Bourdieu makes the point that habitus forms over time and produces durable ways of being which are transposable into other social fields but are not immutable. The notion enables us to perceive the existence of invisible, underlying logics which affect why individuals act and think as they do.

Archer’s (2012) investigation into science aspirations finds that family habitus plays a key role in determining students’ attitudes towards science and their future participation in the field. Not only does home provide some students with ‘science capital’ which makes curriculum content more familiar, it also makes careers involving science seem ‘natural’ and therefore possible. The strong influence of home habitus on aspirations is reasserted by Hoskins and Barker (2017) who point out the disparities between governmental insistence on social mobility and young people’s desire to follow in their parents’ footsteps. These analyses build on earlier work by Reay et al (2001, 2005 cited in Archer, 2007) which use habitus to explain patterns of social reproduction in higher education. Although Willis (1977) did not use the term habitus, his study is concerned with how working-class students tend to get

working-class jobs and, like Archer, and Hoskins and Barker, he discusses the influence of home on how students relate to school and employment. The ways in which habitus shapes people's sense of what is 'for me' and what is 'not for the likes of me' has thus been present in academic literature for over forty years.

However, Bourdieu emphasises that habitus is not deterministic. Instead, it transcends the dichotomy between structure and agency because it explains how structure guides and limits us but also leaves space for individual agency. For example, it explains why a lot of working-class students do not go to university (such as those in Archer's 2007 study) but also why some do (such as those in Travers's 2017 study). As Bourdieu states:

'It expresses first the result of an organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination.' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 214 original emphasis)

Students arrive at school with a habitus shaped by their home or upbringing. For middle-class students, this habitus involves knowledge of the cultural capital valued by the education system which makes it easier for them to succeed academically, as discussed above. However, school is a social space (or field) which also shapes habitus and influences a student's 'way of being', from expectations of uniform, deportment and behaviour, to attitudes to learning and predispositions towards curriculum knowledge. School can therefore be said to comprise an institutional habitus which interacts with the home habitus that students bring with them. The greater congruence between home and institutional habitus for middle-class students gives this group advantages in the field of school.

Lareau (2003/2011), Ingram (2009) and Stahl (2013) are all interested in the interaction between home and institutional habitus. Lareau coins the phrases '*concerted cultivation*' and the '*accomplishment of natural growth*' to identify the cultural logics which govern child rearing practices in middle-class and working-class homes respectively. Concerted cultivation involves parents taking active steps to develop the skills they perceive as important to success, such as articulacy nurtured by discussion or discipline gained from learning a musical instrument. Whereas the

accomplishment of natural growth places trust in the development that occurs without adult intervention. Lareau sees these approaches as aspects of family habitus. She uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework because of its sensitivity to the complexity and fluidity of social life, for example the way people have a wide array of resources, social networks and cultural training but do not always use these capitals in all settings.

The differential activation of resources is of interest to Ingram (2009) in her study of how the family habitus of boys from the same social background and community is mediated by the institutional habitus of a grammar school on one hand and a comprehensive on the other. Like Kulz (2017), she sees the acculturation expected in the grammar school as a form of symbolic violence which involves a misrecognition of working-class culture:

'an example of pedagogic action validating middle-class norms and simultaneously invalidating the norms of the working class.' (Ingram, 2009, p. 431)

The students who succeed in the grammar school do so largely by rejecting their working-class identities whilst those in the comprehensive school reject academic success. As she points out, the end result is

'the maintenance of class inequalities as one group rejects its class of origin in favour of upward mobility and the other secures its working-class position' (Ingram, 2009, p. 432)

My research similarly explores the interaction between family and institutional habitus and asks to what extent it is possible to succeed at school whilst retaining a working-class identity.

I use these tools with an awareness that there has been some debate about the legitimacy of the terms institutional and family habitus. Whilst Atkinson (2011) asserts the value of Ingram and Reay's empirical work, he suggests that the terms are illogical misnomers. Instead of institutional habitus he suggests that Bourdieu's

concept of *doxa* is a more accurate way of referring to the unspoken assumptions and practices which are often meant by institutional and family habitus.

Doxa can be defined as:

‘pre-reflexive, shared but unquestioned opinions and perceptions conveyed within and by relatively autonomous social entities – fields – which determine “natural” practice and attitudes via the internalized “sense of limits” and habitus of the agents in those fields. Doxa is “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma”’ (Deer in Grenfell, 2014, p. 115)

Doxa are invisible because beliefs and opinions have been naturalised. In a school context, this means that teachers and educational leaders tend not to question the assumptions which govern practice and ‘the way we do things here’ or to see that they come from the habitus of dominant agents. Atkinson (2011) uses school-specific doxa as a synonym for school ethos. I use Bourdieu’s notion of doxa similarly in my analysis of school wide values and practices to *‘unveil the doxic conflation between objective social structures and subjective mental dispositions’* (Deer in Grenfell, 2014, p. 117). It is this conflation which gives rise to misrecognition as agents assume that practices which spring from their values are common sense rather than a product of a specific cultural logic.

Bourdieu brings together the notions of doxa and misrecognition in this statement:

‘The adherence expressed in the doxic relation to the social world is the absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness, since it is unaware of the very question of legitimacy’ (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 168)

When discussing school ethos, I therefore use the terms doxa and misrecognition to explore how white working-class students are alienated by a system which does not see the arbitrariness of the values it is imposing. However, I also use the term institutional habitus because of the way it helps to show the alignment between home and school for middle-class students and the concurrent mis-match for

working-class students. To justify the use of both terms within one analysis, they can be regarded as denoting similar, but different concepts.

The wider field of education is governed by doxa which in turn influence the school specific doxa, or school ethos, mentioned by Aktinson (2011). The principles of this doxa are homologous with the habitus of dominant agents. The concept of doxa can thus be used to unpick the ideological assumptions that underpin school practices. However, the school can also be said to have an institutional habitus which is influenced by doxa but distinct from it, just as an individual's habitus is influenced by neoliberal ideology but shaped by more localised forces. The term institutional habitus is thus useful to explore congruence and mismatch in relation to class habitus, as Stahl does in his 2013 study of 'habitus disjuncture'.

Bourdieu emphasises the relational nature of habitus and field: *'the field structures the habitus'* at the same time as *'habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world'* (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992 p.127 cited in Reay 2021 p.56). It is to this last term in the conceptual trio of capital, habitus and field that I now turn.

Field

The concept of field denotes a social space governed by particular rules where agents use the capitals available to them to secure an advantageous position. Disciplines such as music or sociology can be regarded as fields. Whole areas of society, such as education, politics or health care can also be regarded as fields. Often fields are made up of what Bourdieu terms 'subfields' which may denote a particular geographical space, such as a school or area, or a subset of something larger. For example, reggae is a subfield of the larger field of music and the service industry is a subfield of employment.

Three analogies help to convey the various facets of Bourdieu's conceptualisation and will be illustrated with examples from the field of education. The first draws a parallel between social spaces and a football game in which agents work within the 'rules of the game' to improve their position. In education, a school is a social space (a geographically located subfield of the larger field of education) in which students operate according to institutional rules and expectations at the same time as

navigating peer dynamics. To succeed academically they must accrue cultural capital and to succeed socially they need social capital. However, the field is not level in that students enter with different amounts of capital. As discussed above, the cultural capital and habitus which middle-class students bring to school enables them to secure more advantageous academic positions within this field.

The level of congruence between habitus and field also affects students' 'feel for the game' and therefore ability to play it to secure advantage. As Reay (2021) explains:

'when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, as Bourdieu (in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) succinctly summarises, habitus operates like "a fish in water". It is able to take the field around itself for granted. However, when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctions can generate change and transformation but can also have disruptive and destabilising effects.' (Reay, 2021, p. 56)

The greater ease experienced by middle-class students gives them an advantage, just as football players with game-specific knowledge, skills and experience are better placed to succeed than those without.

Stahl (2013) explores the implications for working-class students who experience a 'habitus disjuncture' whereby their home habitus is sufficiently different from the institutional habitus that they are unable to operate naturally within the field of school. In particular, he writes about a disjunction between the field of school and a working-class masculine habitus which makes it difficult for boys to succeed academically at the same time as maintain their social identity. This is a theme explored by others (such as Reay, 2002) and picked up in my research.

Reay (2002), Evans (2006) and Ingram (2009) have written about the psychosocial burden of what Bourdieu terms '*a habitus divided against itself*' in which students cope with a duality of the self, a

'constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive

allegiances and multiple identities' (Bourdieu, 1989 p.511 cited in Stahl, 2013 paragraph 9.2)

Reay (2002) discusses the heavy costs and '*psychic reparative work*' demanded by such situations. Stahl refers to it as being '*tugged*' by the forces of different fields, which invokes the second analogy for the concept of field. This analogy belongs to the realm of science fiction and uses the idea of a force field to distinguish between inside and outside. The inside space (such as a school) comprises a self-contained world with its own hierarchies and power structures, governed by logics of practice. These doxa are not perceived as such by agents (such as school staff) inside the field and they therefore misrecognise the ways in which they reproduce and maintain power relations. For example, as Lareau (2003/2011) explains, the expectation that parents help with homework is part of the cultural logic of middle-class child rearing but its normalisation in the field of education means that working-class parents who do not share this cultural logic are seen as deficient (rather than different). The work of Crozier et al. (2004) on 'activating participation' shows how this can result in a widening of inequality as middle-class parents mobilise cultural capital in line with school expectations whilst working-class parents resist the infiltration of school into the home, feel threatened by its demands and so disengage.

The habitus-field mismatch for the students in Stahl's study (2013) makes it difficult for them to fit both inside the field of school and outside, where their habitus is governed by different logics of practice and different capitals are valued. Their desire to be seen as 'normal' in both spheres is suggested by their aspiration to be '*ordinary*'. The strategy valorised by both these students and those in Reay's study (2009) of working-class students in elite universities is that of flexibility; an ability to adjust and fit into different social spaces. Stahl terms this 'reflexive capital' which is similar to Warin's (2010) notion of 'identity capital'; the ability to create a flexible story of self which enables students to operate across several different fields and therefore resolve the duality articulated by Bourdieu. Reay terms it 'reflexive awareness' which '*comes through recognising and coming to terms with early disjunctions between habitus and the field of education.*' (Reay 2021 p.58). This personal quality represents another form of capital, or resource, which can help students navigate the field of school but to which not all students have equal access. Hence Warin's (2010)

recommendation that schools invest in the social and emotional aspects of learning and identity work which would help all students to develop it.

The final analogy for the concept of field draws on the laws of physics to create a parallel between the force that one object exerts on another, and the interaction between agents within a field. This aspect is useful for my study as I investigate how various relationships (such as teacher-student) mitigate or exacerbate the effects of a habitus-field mismatch and contribute to how students feel about themselves as learners.

In the quotation below Bourdieu touches on ideas of inequality, reproduction, power, struggle and strategy collectively present in the three analogies explained above.

'... a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.' (Bourdieu 1998b: 40–41 cited in Grenfell 2008 p.72)

In the field of school, *'relationships of inequality'* exist between teachers and students and between peers in each of those groups. The *'various actors'* are both staff and students who seek variously to uphold or challenge school rules and norms. They wield forms of symbolic power such as cultural and social capital and use these to manoeuvre in legitimated parts of the field and in less legitimated spaces where such capitals are valued differently. Some actors (such as middle-class students) experience a high level of congruence which make strategies reinforcing. For others there are clashes and dislocations which complicate navigation.

These three analogies thus highlight the characteristics of Bourdieu's concept of field which help make sense of the unseen forces which lead some students to thrive and others to struggle within the same educational institution.

Hysteresis

Bourdieu gives the term *hysteresis* to situations in which there is a habitus-field mismatch. He applies it to temporal situations in which a field has changed over time such that an individual or class habitus no longer enables agents to operate successfully within that field. Bourdieu draws attention to the problematic aspects of the hysteresis effect as follows:

'As a result of the hysteresis effect necessarily implicated in the logic of the constitution of habitus, practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted.' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 78)

Here Bourdieu uses the concept to discuss Algerian peasants displaced by the societal changes brought about by colonial influence. The concept is invoked again more than 20 years later in *The Weight of the World* (1999) when Bourdieu interviews several white working-class French citizens who are suffering from a hysteresis effect caused by changes in the labour market and immigration. Technological advances mean that jobs they used to do (for example in the factory) are no longer available and the jobs which have superseded these are done by unskilled immigrants. Values of hard work, physical labour and a job for life no longer have the same currency and individuals feel unmoored, resentful and powerless. Similar conditions have affected white working-class communities in Britain, compounded by the demise of trade union power under Thatcher (Bottero in Sveinsson, 2009).

The field of education has also changed over time. In recent years, English educational reform has led to a culture of performativity (S. Ball, 2008/2013); privileging of the academic; narrowing of the curriculum; and a devaluation of vocational education (Reay 2017). These changes have been driven by neoliberal ideology and 12 years of Conservative leadership but follow previous changes such as those that came in the wake of the Second World War.

Bourdieu (1984/2010) links changes in the fields of education and employment in his analysis of the impact of mass education. He perceives homologies between fields

and interrelationships which mean that agents who are dominant in one field are often dominant in others. For example, people who are academically successful are also often economically successful; the capitals and strategies employed in one field can operate in others and capitals gained in one field hold symbolic value in another:

'Education as symbolic capital work[s] together with other capitals to advantage and disadvantage, and to position agents in multiple fields.'
(Grenfell, 2014, p. 74)

This relates to the idea discussed previously that working-class students are disadvantaged at both stages of the transformation: from cultural capital to institutional capital in the field of education and then from institutional capital to economic capital in the field of employment. Habitus-field mismatch plays a part in both, together with the related ability to wield a range of capitals to secure an advantageous position.

Reay (2021) explores this dynamic in her analysis of working-class students' experiences in an elite English university. Their discomfort and marginalisation mean that they struggle to fully participate in social networks, which has implications for later labour market success as well as their university experience. Chen (2020) similarly investigates habitus-field mismatch in a university setting but in a Chinese context of rural students moving to urban universities. She uses the tool of hysteresis to make sense of the suffering which ensues from a double disjuncture: the rural-urban disjuncture as rural students move for the first time into urban university settings and the academic disjuncture whereby the ways of working and thinking valued by rural schooling are different from those demanded by students' undergraduate studies.

In Bourdieu's application of hysteresis the change in field is occasioned by a lapse of time whereas in Chen's application it is socio-spatial; the students have physically moved away from their home community into a field shaped by a very different class habitus. However, the dynamics are homologous and the suffering is of a similar type.

As Hardy writes:

'hysteresis, as a thinking tool, provides explicit links between the objective nature of systemic change (field transformation) and the subjective character of an individual response to that change (altered habitus). In this way, it allows us to appreciate the nature and consequences of field changes as experienced personally and at a social environmental level.' (Hardy in Grenfell, 2014, pp. 144-145)

Hysteresis is therefore a useful tool for my study as I seek to understand white working-class students' experience of disjuncture between their class habitus and the field of school as well as the intergenerational hysteresis effect on their families produced by changes in the fields of education and employment over the last 40 years.

Bourdieu saw education as a key part of social reproduction. He demonstrated that the people who benefitted most from the education system were those who already possessed cultural and economic capital. This is as true of the English system today as it was of French schooling in the latter part of last century. It remains a field which reproduces itself. This is in part because of the interaction between habitus and field and the way that the field is governed by doxa which are congruent with the habitus of those in power. Before offering some further concluding remarks about the conceptual tools outlined above, I will address the limitations of Bourdieu's work and how I theorise the racial aspects of my study.

Limitations

The conceptual armoury present in Bourdieu's work and their evident flexibility has made him a key figure in the sociology of education (and in many other fields). However, his work has also attracted criticism. Paradoxically, the versatility of his concepts is also the ground on which they are criticised. Habitus is difficult to define and can thus be prone to both reductionism and proliferation (Maton in Grenfell, 2014, p. 62); used simplistically as a synonym for social background or generate subsets that *'violate conceptual logic'* (Atkinson, 2011, p. 332). Similar criticisms are levelled at the concept of field: that borders are difficult to define and that there can be too many fields.

In addition, the relation between field and habitus in processes of social reproduction has been seen as deterministic, even though Bourdieu is himself overtly interested in change and the dynamic quality of interactions (Thomson in Grenfell, 2014, p. 77). A response to these criticisms is that Bourdieu's theoretical framework represents, as he says, "a *temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work*" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1989d: 50 cited in Maton in Grenfell, 2014, p.60). They are tools for thinking and for making sense of what is observed in the process of research. As such, it is useful for them to be flexible and with edges that are blurred.

Another important criticism is that his work fails to deal adequately with race. It is true that his primary focus is social class. However, I would argue that his tools can be used in analyses of race, as do Shah et al. (2010) who extend the notion of capital to 'ethnic capital' to explore the educational achievement of British Pakistani students and the ways in which it can offset social class disadvantage. This application is supported by Savage in the Runnymede report into class and race (Khan, 2017).

I would also argue that race is not absent from Bourdieu's work but rather positioned as another axis of (dis)advantage. Many chapters in *Weight of the World* (1999) focus on sites where racial dynamics and prejudice are at play. In *The Last Difference* interviews are held with working-class white citizens who are sympathetic to Arab immigrant populations and those who are hostile as well as with the immigrant families themselves as part of an effort to understand the complex dynamics of social class and race. Three chapters are dedicated to analysis of Black American ghettos and the multiple disadvantages which grip the lives of people in these spaces. Whilst a chapter entitled *The Order of Things* draws explicit parallels between the lives of two close friends, a French Arab and French White youth who suffer from similar disadvantages except that the Arab young man's situation is taken to the extreme by the additional racial barriers he faces.

Although Bourdieu may not have separately theorised race, I would therefore argue that his interest and analyses extend to race and that he sees racial prejudice from an intersectional perspective as another aspect of social identity. Nonetheless, the

absence of direct consideration of racial identity has led me to consult other theorists about this aspect of my work, as detailed below.

Whiteness and Intersectionality

My study is explicitly focused on white working-class secondary school students. It is therefore necessary to explain how I theorise whiteness in the context of this research. In the introduction to the Runnymede collection of articles entitled *'Who Cares About the White Working-Class?'*, Sveinsson states:

'The running theme throughout the contributions is that the plight of the white working class is constructed – by the media, politicians and anti-immigrant groups – as either the fault of immigrants and minority ethnic groups, or the cultural deficit of the underclass itself, or both, while leaving the hierarchical and highly stratified nature of Britain out of the equation.' (Sveinsson, 2009, p. 5)

Sveinsson's summary draws attention to several discourses which surround this group of people (as discussed in Chapter 1) and the intertwined nature of class and race. There is also a body of scholarship which focuses on whiteness as a socially constructed signifier and draws attention to the dangers of allowing it to exist as a neutral or default category. Scholars such as Leonardo (2002) explore the ways in which whiteness manifests as privilege and assert the need to critically engage with whiteness to interrupt the global links between economic and racial privilege.

Therefore, on one hand there is the assertion that social equality should focus on race because whiteness needs to be decentred to dismantle white privilege and end racial discrimination:

'White people are not all equally privileged, but all White people do gain some advantage from their Whiteness: their interests are assumed to be important and any challenge to their centrality is met with hostility and violence, both symbolic and physical' (Gillborn, 2008 p.234)

However, on the other hand there is the assertion that social equality should focus on *class* because the structural inequalities which maintain class hierarchies affect all ethnic groups. A research focus on white working-class people is subject to the tensions between these assertions.

My interest is in social class. I acknowledge that the participants in my research do not suffer from racial discrimination and in this way they '*gain some advantage from their Whiteness*' (Gillborn, 2008). However, they do suffer from the class discrimination which is rife in English society (Jones, 2012). I am interested in a particular group of working-class white people who are historically situated in relation to the English education system and who have been prominent in media discourses. The white FSM pupils in my study are not first, second or third generation immigrants from Europe or other majority white continents (although two can trace Irish heritage) but people who have been subject to the stratified nature of English society and education for generations. To have included non-white or white immigrant groups in the study would have been to introduce other variables which, although illuminating, would have diverted my attention from a primarily class focus.

The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is useful here: individuals exist simultaneously in several social categories (for example race, class, gender, sexuality) which interact in ways which affect experience. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to explore the ways in which black women's experience of gender injustice is different from that of white women's, because race compounds gender discrimination. However, the term has since been used more widely to consider how multiple social categories work together to inflect experience.

For the purposes of my research, I therefore theorise whiteness as one aspect of an intersectional position. Class is the primary focus and attributes of whiteness and socioeconomic history are others which act as shared identity markers for the group. Gender is also a characteristic which I explore from an intersectional perspective. Though is not the main focus of analysis, gender intersects with class and race to produce significantly different experiences for white working-class males and females in relation to education, even whilst there are aspects which overlap. I use the notion of intersectionality to make sense of these differences and commonalities.

My research asks: what is it to be a working-class, white, historically situated, male or female in an inner London secondary school today? At the same time, like the authors in the Runnymede report, I am interested in how the experiences of these sub-groups relate to *other* working-class groups and therefore how my findings have wider implications.

Conclusion

Bourdieu was interested in social reproduction and saw education as a prime site where hegemonic power relations are reproduced despite being the very institution tasked with improving social equality. I have shown the ways in which Bourdieu and subsequent academics have used his conceptual tools to unpick how this happens; how the field of education is governed by doxa which are homologous with middle-class values; how the system rewards the cultural capital which is part of the inheritance of the middle-class; how the habitus of middle-class students gives them a 'feel for the game' which places them at an advantage in the field of education; how the distribution of capitals, together with the habitus-field mismatch experienced by working-class students, puts them at a disadvantage in both the fields of education and employment; how the symbolic capitals (in the form of cultural knowledge and aspirations) of middle-class students are legitimated but those of working-class students are not.

The academics cited focus their analysis on white working-class students specifically, working-class students of various ethnicities, and/or middle-class students. Their research sites range from primary school to higher education. My study uses the same conceptual tools to investigate how white working-class identities interact with the subfields of three secondary schools to shape educational experiences. Whilst taking account of discourses of whiteness, I take an intersectional approach which sees the race of my participants as intimately bound up with their class and gender and situated in a specific historical space.

Bourdieu's notion of doxa helps to see behind the assumptions which guide current practices in schools and to separate out the structures from the mental dispositions

which give rise to them. His concept of symbolic violence and the suffering it induces is a valuable way to understand the effect of imposing a set of cultural norms as if they have intrinsic worth. The idea of misrecognition makes it easier to see how this can implicitly devalue other forms of symbolic capital and provoke resistance. The hysteresis effect enables a habitus-field mismatch to encompass temporal as well as socio-spatial dislocation and provides a framework to understand impact across generations as well as on individuals in the present. When viewed through these lenses, the disengagement which is often linked to white working-class underachievement (Willis 1977, Ingram 2009, Evans 2010, Stahl 2017) can be seen in a new light, as can the 'low aspirations' with which they are labelled.

Writing about habitus, Maton comments that *'its principal contribution is to shape our habitus, to engender a sociological gaze by helping to transform our ways of seeing the social world' (in Grenfell, 2014, p. 48)*. I would argue that this is true of a range of Bourdieusian tools. They can give a name to a nexus of ideas or impressions we have had but been unable to fully articulate. Bourdieu's tools have provided a framework through which to analyse my findings and to place them within a larger sense making process. This allows me to build more firmly on previous research and increases the validity of my own contribution.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter sets out what has already been thought and written about issues which are pertinent to my study. It serves to contextualise my research and provides an overview of the ideas which I refer to in the analysis of my findings. It starts with an exploration of the intertwined nature of race and class in the context of education and how the white working-class, as a raced and classed group, fit into this picture. The second section gives an historical account of the educational landscape in order to show how the preoccupations of the current system have come into being and to explore the implications of past and present developments for groups such as the white working-class.

The following five sections can be mapped onto the analysis chapters. They start with a focus on school ethos as the backdrop which mediates students' experience of school. This section looks at the discrepancies which can exist between official and felt ethos and the implications for marginalised groups. The next section focuses on pedagogy; how classroom-based practices are influenced by school ethos and how they affect students. It summarises findings about pedagogies of poverty, the contextual factors which affect the pedagogies promoted in different schools and what this means for social equality. Social and learner identities are the focus of the following section; how different groups navigate the tension between identities within a system which validates some and pathologises others. Gender is a key consideration in this section, as is the way that social and learner identities are impacted by both school ethos and classroom pedagogy. The following section moves beyond the school gates to discuss the impact of the home-school relationship; how different parents are positioned by school and their own experiences, and how this impacts their children. The final section focuses on the complex and contentious issues of aspiration and social mobility. It considers the influence of discourses of meritocracy, the nature of social reproduction, how school practices legitimate or undermine particular aspirations, and the psychological and practical barriers students face in relation to social mobility. The chapter concludes

with some comments on the key issues identified in the literature and how they link to my research.

Race and Class

Race and class are key personal characteristics which influence educational experiences and employment opportunities. In analyses of the social injustices perpetuated by the British education system, there has been debate about whether it is more important to focus on class or racial discrimination (M. Cole, 2009; Gillborn, 2009). The palpable presence of racism within society makes it clear that it is not sufficient to focus solely on class. However, a sole focus on race ignores the wider societal structures which perpetuate inequality for white people as well as ethnic minorities. Many people interested in equality in education therefore consider both. Indeed, Gillborn (2012) states that one cannot be understood without the other, hence the intersectional approach of academics such as Lareau (Lareau, 2003/2011) and Reay (2017) who explore how experiences of class intersect with race (and gender).

The notion of overlapping and divergent interests (Khan, 2017) is a useful way of unpicking the influence of class and race. Poverty, precarity and structural inequalities shape the lives of working-class people of all ethnicities (Bottero in Sveinsson, 2009; Bhattacharyya in Khan, 2017). A social justice approach draws attention to common barriers, the need for redistribution of resources (Keddie, 2015) and policies which protect the rights of those with less social and economic power (Khan, 2017). The current education system is one such structural inequality which disadvantages both white and ethnic minority working-class students through the normalisation of middle-class values and practices (Bourdieu, 1977a), in and between school segregation, lack of resources, competition, and excessive assessment (Reay, 2017).

Both Youdell (2003) and Stahl (2017) are concerned with the ways in which schools pathologise working-class young people, though Youdell focuses on black and Stahl

on white students. The identity trap into which the black students in Youdell's (2003) study fall is similar to the experience of white boys in Stahl's (2017) study and girls of various ethnicities in Archer et al's (2007) work: in seeking to secure social capital these young people set themselves up in opposition to education and thereby fix themselves in the marginalised social positions which have occasioned their reliance on non-institutional forms of capital.

A significant overlapping interest of those concerned with class and race in an educational context is therefore:

'how educational exclusions are produced through the mundane and day-to-day processes and practices of educational institutions' (D. Youdell, 2006, p. 13)

In this respect, working-class students of all ethnic backgrounds face similar structural difficulties at school. Like Youdell or Stahl, my research focuses on one racial group within the working-class, but many of the findings are relevant to more than just this group.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the divergent interests of white and ethnic minority working-class students. Racism is central to such differences: *'the white working-class are discriminated against on a range of different fronts... But they are not discriminated against because they are white'* (Sveinsson, 2009). The white working-class have been positioned in opposition to multiculturalism both as active agents contributing to racism (Virdee and Bhattacharyya in Khan, 2017; Gillborn & Kirton, 2000) and as pawns used by those in power to deflect attention and resources away from tackling racism (Gillborn, 2012). Academics working on whiteness therefore see sharp distinctions between the interests of white and ethnic minority students: while white students are complicit in maintaining their advantageous position, ethnic minority students need to dismantle whiteness to realise their potential (Leonardo, 2002).

Differences also arise because of intersectional positions produced by divergent histories. Echoing Reay's (2017) comment cited in Chapter 1, Li's work (in Khan,

2017) explains why class effects are more pronounced for whites than ethnic minorities: positive attitudes to education held by (positively selected) first generation migrants boost attainment whilst historically poor relationships to education adversely affect white working-class attainment. Although marginalisation may be a common experience and some recommendations would benefit all working-class groups, interests may diverge because students and their families enter the school system with different needs, feelings and expectations. This recalls two of the discourses about the white working-class outlined in Chapter 1: that which focuses on the structural inequalities which affect working-class pupils of all ethnicities; and that concerned with the particular intersectional position of the white working-class as distinct from that of other ethnic groups.

The other two discourses are also entangled with those of race. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 1, when the white working-class are perceived as victims they are invariably seen as losing out to multiculturalism rather than to wealth. Secondly, discourses which focus on the deficiencies of white working-class culture and people often compare them unfavourably with ethnic minority groups, who are seen to do better or make more of similar educational opportunities and economic conditions. Such comparisons feed long-standing notions of 'the undeserving poor' who do not try to help themselves. Whether 'victims' or 'degenerates' (Gillborn, 2012) the white working-class are therefore positioned in relation to ethnic minorities in ways which serve the interests of those in power, without meeting the needs of those who have been marginalised by either class or race or both.

This section has considered the overlapping and divergent interests of white and ethnic minority working-class students and some of the implications for education. In short, it is harder for such students to succeed than it is for the white middle-class. The system discriminates on the basis of both class and race. For white working-class students difficulties arise because of class, but not race. Ethnic minority working-class students experience both classism and racism. However, axes of disadvantage do not necessarily operate on a cumulative basis (Crenshaw, 1991). White working-class students can (and do) therefore fare both better and worse than their ethnic minority counterparts in relation to educational attainment and employment because they occupy different intersectional positions. My research

focuses on class more than race because it is the basis of the discrimination faced by white working-class students. However, many of my findings are relevant to ethnic minority working-class students and are corroborated by studies of non-white groups.

The next section gives an overview of the current educational landscape and how it came into being. In so doing it provides insight into the historical relationship that the white working-class have with education and how the system has developed in ways which disadvantage students on the basis of race as well as class.

The educational landscape: past and present

Ball (2008/2013) and Reay (2017) both give historical accounts of the growth of education for all which demonstrate explicit and intentional stratification and argue that the effects can still be felt in the present day. The Education Act of 1870 ushered in an expectation that all children receive primary education. However, what was to be learnt, how, where and for what purpose was closely aligned to class, making education a regulatory tool of those in power.

Despite shifts in thinking prompted by the Second World War, social division was perpetuated by the 1944 Education Act which promoted secondary education for all, but endorsed a tripartite system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. Although in principle children of different socioeconomic background could attend any type of provision, in practice segregation continued. As Ken Jones (2003) details in *Education in Britain 1944 to the Present*, the public schools were left untouched, few working-class children passed the 11+ exam for grammar school and secondary moderns and technical schools were of poor quality.

In places such as London, socialist thinkers advocated a comprehensive model (Margaret Cole, 1946) to actively promote social cohesion, raise the status of technical education and provide high quality for all. However, these plans were attacked by Conservatives who did not want provision watered down by *'the indigestible porridge of the lower educational element'* (quoted by Cole, 1946). Such attitudes and resistance to change is evidence that the system was underpinned by

a belief that social division was natural (Jones, 2003) and that the working-classes were inferior.

Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* (1962) was influential in its exploration of working-class experiences of education, including how middle-class culture permeated grammar schools and resulted in a gradual attrition of working-class identity for the few pupils who got in. Their work suggested education be reframed as cultural dialogue rather than imposition – a stance reiterated by Plowden (1967), the Bullock Report of 1975 and relevant to race as well as class. Indeed, in the 1960s:

'Nowhere was the conflict between a normative school culture and a pathologised school population demonstrated more clearly than in attitudes towards migrant students from Ireland, the Caribbean and South Asia' (K. Jones, 2003, p. 65)

This positioning of the 'other' as undesirable and the accompanying discrimination experienced by these migrant groups and white working-class pupils has had a marginalising effect transmitted through generations (Walkerdine, 2015).

Progressive thinking of the 1960s and 70s, together with increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of secondary modern education, prompted a more widespread movement towards comprehensive schools. For liberals, this period is seen as a golden age in which teachers actively engaged in debate about the purposes and forms of education and child centred, culturally sensitive pedagogies flourished (K. Jones, 2003, p. 70). However, whilst there were pockets of success, there were simultaneous problems which undermined comprehensive education as a national solution: the attack on progressive education, in the form of the Black Papers, from 1969; lack of political commitment by both Labour and Conservative governments; a still untouched public school system; widespread practices of setting and streaming which recreated social segregation within each school; the 'stickiness' of the old label of grammar or secondary modern; and a lack of resources (S. Ball, 2008/2013, p. 79). By the early 1980s, comprehensives were held up by Conservatives as the

epitome of 'woolly' liberal thinking and judged as a failure, without proper acknowledgement of these structural limitations (S. Ball, 2008/2013, p. 84).

The 1980s saw the rise of Thatcherism and with it, myriad assaults on working-class power and identity. Owen Jones (2012) in *Chavs: the Demonisation of the Working-class*, charts the growth of individualism and the divide and rule approach of a government responsible for dismantling trade unions, selling off social housing, deregulating the market and framing working-class life as something to escape. Walkerdine et al (2001) explore the psychosocial dimensions of this period through the lens of class and gender and note the discrepancies between the experiences of working and middle-class young women, particularly in relation to treatment at school and career trajectories.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 undermined the educational culture developed between 1944 and 1979 and created one in which '*old social actors were marginalised and new ones rendered powerful*' (K. Jones, 2003, p. 131). Whilst the National Curriculum and national testing claimed to equalise standards and promote transparency, they reduced teachers' ability to be responsive to the students in front of them, enshrined dominant views of what counted as knowledge, and created a hierarchy of schools, which fuelled polarisation. The latter was exacerbated by the market driven approach to funding, which reduced Local Authority control and further fragmented an already divided provision (S. Ball, 2018; K. Jones, 2003).

Although Blair's government (1997-2007) invested heavily in education, the privatisation of education through academisation, emphasis on league tables and focus on education as serving the needs of the economy, continued what Thatcher had set in motion. A culture change had occurred: towards performativity, business model management, school effectiveness and improvement and away from teacher and pupil agency and democratic processes. Whilst New Labour rejected Conservative tolerance of widening inequality, its approach of 'selective universalism' targeted support at the poorest groups rather than dismantling structural inequality (K. Jones, 2003, p. 145).

Widespread setting practices, endorsed by Blair (in the 1997 White Paper), the proliferation of assessment, which has been shown not just to measure but to actively produce inequality (A. Bradbury, 2013) and the neoconservative approach to curriculum and qualifications spearheaded by Gove (2010-14) are all structural features of the educational landscape which have increased inequality. Indeed, as Reay points out:

‘socioeconomic attainment gaps widen, rather than narrow, as children progress through school, implying that schooling exacerbates, rather than mitigates, social class inequalities in attainment outcomes’ (Reay, 2017, p. 74).

The introduction of Pupil Premium funding (driven by the Liberal Democrats in 2011) was a recognition of such inequalities and the lasting impact of financial precarity: children who have qualified for Free School Meals at any point in the last six years are eligible for ‘pupil premium’ funding which their school can use to help mitigate the effects of poverty on educational attainment. It increases the proportion of pupils who attract additional funding and encourages schools to actively think about how to combat the effects of socio-economic disadvantage. However, when placed alongside policies which effectively reduce funding for schools serving poorer communities (Public Accounts Committee, 2021), and within broader discourses which place responsibility firmly on the individual and cultural practices of communities, its potential to reduce inequality is limited.

As discussed in Chapter 1, neoliberalism focuses on what the individual achieves within a meritocracy in which everyone has equal access to social mobility. But, for Reay and Littler (2017), meritocracy is a *‘powerful means of legitimising both social exclusion and elitism’* (Reay, 2017, p. 122) because people do not have equal access and the fields into which they may be admitted are anyway deeply hierarchical. Social mobility is also a contested term. Taken to its logical conclusion, it suggests that politicians’ ultimate solution to inequality is the eradication of the working class and its associated cultures (Gewirtz, 2001). This trajectory is exemplified in Kulz’s ethnographic study (2017) of an urban academy where white

middle-class culture and values are normalised to such an extent that anything 'other' is pathologised and banned.

Policies in favour of academies have grown exponentially under Coalition then Conservative governments, despite having no demonstrable positive effect on educational standards (Andrews & Perera, 2017). Whilst there are various types of academy, many adopt the disciplinarian approaches exemplified in Kulz's study, which reproduce dominant power relations and, in so doing, marginalise working-class pupils (Reay, 2017, p. 59). Although none of the schools in my study are academies, it could be argued that the trend for zero-tolerance behaviour policies has influenced practices in maintained schools too.

Reay draws parallels between the function and effect of education in the Victorian era and modern times:

'Just as was the case in the 19th century, we are educating the working classes to be subservient and compliant, cramming them with facts, and then continually testing their recall. Such teaching to the test means that political awareness, critical thinking and problem solving have all been neglected' (Reay, 2017, p. 179)

Despite a plethora of policies and reforms, Reay suggests that the working-class are not much better served by education than they were 150 years ago. In 1931 Tawney wrote about the ways in which aspects of the past leave their imprint:

'the hereditary curse of English education has been its organisation along the lines of social class' (Tawney, 1931, p. 142)

Research suggests that this 'hereditary curse' can still be felt today and has particularly strong implications for the engagement of white working-class pupils and their families who have been poorly served by a socially divided education system for generations. In the Victorian times it was used as a regulatory tool, from 1944 working-class pupils received second class education in secondary moderns and

technical schools and from 1988 they have been marginalised by a system which advantages the middle class but attributes failure to the individual.

The present

Through the Education Acts of 1870, 1944 and 1988 and the recent proliferation of educational policies it is possible to trace changes and continuities in societal values and how education is positioned in relation to them. Education has become increasingly linked to the economy to the detriment of its social aspects:

'The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education' (S. Ball, 2008/2013, pp. 11-12)

Warin reiterates this observation in *Stories of Self* (2010), which advocates greater attention to personal and emotional development as part of a commitment to social equality. She observes that 'identity capital' (ability to create a coherent narrative of the self) is more developed through middle-class habitus and can be instrumental in enabling pupils to successfully navigate the identity conflicts and vicissitudes of school life. It is therefore important that schools create space for intra and interpersonal development from a social equality perspective so that all pupils have these critical tools. Whilst the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) found a place in educational discourse in the early years of this century, by 2010 they were subsumed within the subject areas of history and PSHE instead of being part of a whole school approach as originally intended (Gross, 2012; Warin, 2010). Warin writes about:

'the continuation of economic and politically influenced performance goals lurking alongside a focus on children's social and emotional wellbeing. These make uncomfortable bed-fellows. The policy initiatives for enhancing personal qualities are undercut by the stronger policy drive for economic competition.'
(Warin, 2010, p. 184)

Although mental health and wellbeing have made it onto the political agenda, Warin supports Ball's sense that this is lip service whilst performance drives policy. Bronwen Jones in her book *Educating the Neoliberal Whole Child* (2021) goes a step further to argue that discourses about the importance of the 'whole child' have been co-opted by neoliberalism to focus responsibility back on the individual as a vehicle of relentless self-improvement rather than constituting a genuine space for social and emotional growth. This parallels the way putative 'autonomy' for schools is circumscribed by what counts as capital in a competitive market (Thompson, Lingard, & Ball, 2021).

The interpretation and enactment of policies and the pressures leaders are under have deeply affected practices in schools (S. Ball, Braun, & Maguire, 2012). In the state sector, the panoptic gaze of Ofsted determines discourses and pedagogies (Perryman, 2006) and curriculum is heavily influenced by what is measured in performance tables. Policy discourses form a 'regime of truth' which shape how teachers perceive themselves and what it is possible or appropriate to talk about (S. J. Ball, 2015). This context helps to make sense of what I observed during my fieldwork as schools and students grappled with performance pressure against a backdrop of (often unattended to) social and emotional issues.

The tension between schools as producers of academic results and well-rounded citizens was brought to the fore by the pandemic, as were stark social inequalities. Work into teachers' experience of the Covid-19 pandemic (A. Bradbury et al., 2022) draws attention to the dual function of schools: the duty to care and the duty to teach. It suggests that for schools serving disadvantaged communities, the duty to care was uppermost. The extreme circumstances of lock-down served to disrupt dominant discourses of performativity and accountability and reposition the role of school and pupil well-being. However, the resumption of Ofsted and assessment regimes threaten to drown out this message.

Bourdieu's words in 1999 remain true today:

'those in charge of acting on the spot – social workers and teachers especially – are obliged to expend a lot of energy for often derisory results, with the

wider mechanisms ceaselessly undoing what they are trying to do.' (Bourdieu & Ferguson, 1999, p. 58)

Teachers' best efforts before, during and after the pandemic can feel futile in the face of deep structural inequalities. Indeed, Gorard's analysis (2010) confirms that educational outcomes are largely determined by socio-economic factors: the social background of the children who attend a school have far more influence on attainment outcomes than anything the school does. However, he also suggests that *'the social experiences of young people in schools can begin to equalise educational outcomes'* (Gorard, 2010, p. 47) when more comprehensive and less segregated systems are in place.

This is supported by the work of Francis et al (2020) which demonstrates that setting practices entrench social inequalities whilst mixed attainment grouping has the potential to reduce class and race-based disadvantage. It is also supported by Bragg and Manchester's (2017) work with Creative Partnership schools which suggests that pupil engagement is better in schools which foster collaboration and student agency, and Cremin et al's (2014) work on Reading for Pleasure which again illustrates the benefits of social and agentic approaches. However, ironically, the practices advocated by these examples are all made difficult in the current educational landscape.

The educational experiences of young people are shaped by the tension between school as a social and economic force, between schools' duty to care and the duty to teach, between education as a means of greater social equality and a mechanism which perpetuates division. Working-class young people are particularly vulnerable to the fall-out from these tensions: they are more likely to go to schools under pressure from Ofsted (Hutchings, 2015; Lupton, 2005); to experience material deprivation and associated mental and physical ill-health; and to experience marginalisation and symbolic violence. As such, this context is pertinent to my study of the factors that enable and hinder engagement for white working-class students. The broader educational landscape has a direct impact on the climate within a school. I turn now therefore to school ethos and its role in mediating students' experiences of school.

School ethos

School ethos is an elusive, contested term which has been part of educational discourse for over a hundred years. Alder (1993) provides a useful definition which draws attention to its slippery nature and foregrounds the role of social interaction and the primacy of felt experience.

'The ethos of a school, that illusive term which is so difficult to recognise, measure or improve, is the unique, pervasive atmosphere or mood of the organisation which is brought about by activities or behaviour, primarily in the realm of social interaction and to a lesser extent in matters to do with the environment, of members of the school, and recognised initially on an experiential rather than a cognitive level.' (Alder, 1993, p. 69)

Various studies (Donnelly, 2000; Eisner, 1994) have identified a discrepancy between the official prescribed ethos of a school, as articulated by senior leaders and published in vision statements and policy documents, and the felt experience of staff and students. Donnelly's exemplification of positivist (official rhetoric) and anti-positivist (felt experience) versions of school ethos provide a framework to understand how these co-exist. In her nuanced three-dimensional model, aspirational ethos as articulated by school authorities and published in documents, is at one end of the continuum. In the middle is the ethos of outward attachment which is how it manifests in social interaction, the physical environment and structural organisation. At the 'deeper' end of the continuum is the ethos of inward attachment which concerns *'individuals' deep seated thoughts, feelings and perceptions'* (Donnelly, 2000, p. 151).

This model is congruent with the notion that there is a plurality of perspectives: a school ethos may be differently experienced by different groups within a school. Such groups may be distinguishable by named position (the senior leadership team as opposed to the teachers; the staff as opposed to the students) but also by

factions within these larger groups. Graham's study (2012) of school ethos through the eyes of a single social group of final year secondary school students illustrates the centrality of social interaction and the ways in which structural and organisational aspects of the school influence such interaction. For example, by determining which students are in lessons together or mix through extra-curricular activities. It also draws attention to the variant experience of social groups within the student body and the role of power: some groups wield social power by determining what is 'cool', whilst others gain institutional recognition from academic achievement. Graham found that the social interaction between students, and that between students and teachers, is intrinsically linked to their sense of the school ethos.

There is overlap between the term 'school ethos' and Bourdieu's concept of institutional habitus in that both denote the imprint of values and ideological assumptions. Some of the phenomenon noted above can also be seen through a Bourdieusian lens. For example, the differences between the experiences of groups of students can be explained in terms of congruence between home and institutional habitus, the value of different forms of capital and how this affects students' power to secure an advantageous position within the field of school. However, school ethos includes the sense of a school's conscious intentions, which is not present in the concept of institutional habitus. The term thereby facilitates investigation of the discrepancies between intention and felt experience. In the introduction to Chapter 5 I explain how I use both terms to show the operation of the theoretical framework at the same time as drawing on the nuances of the term school ethos and its practical use in educational settings.

My research investigates the three dimensions of school ethos identified by Donnelly and how they intersect. In particular, I am interested in how the positivist or aspirational school ethos interacts with the identities and experiences of a socially marginalised group, the white working-class. Central to this is how a school positions the social and emotional aspects of learning. Gross (2012), in her discussion of the importance of an integrated SEAL curriculum, cites Holsen's research (2009) which shows that such teaching is particularly empowering for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This is echoed by both Warin (2010) in her work on identity capital, and Siraj (2014). The latter uses the term 'climate' rather than ethos

but asserts that a school climate which explicitly fosters positive relationships constitutes a 'protective factor' which can help disadvantaged students succeed against the odds.

These findings are supported by the work of Bragg and Manchester (2017) with Creative Partnership schools in which school ethos acts as a mechanism to challenge the performative culture of the current educational landscape. They explore how notions of ethos *for* and *as* learning might enable schools to '*prefigure alternative, more socially just worlds*' (2017, p. 2). Such schools are '*considerate, convivial and capacious*'. Attention is given to the feelings and well-being of all members, dialogue and inter-relationships shape learning, there are high levels of agency, and space for a wide range of skills, experiences and perspectives.

However, Bragg and Manchester (2017) are also alert to the way that school ethos can operate in an opposite manner: as an instrument of power and conformity which serves to reproduce existing power relations. They trace how school ethos became seen as a low-cost strategy for school improvement at a time when schools were under increasing pressure to perform. Indeed, by 2011 the Department for Education states that school ethos is '*paramount in obtaining a successful learning environment*' (cited in Graham, 2012, p. 3). Viewed in this way, school ethos is about control by those in power, as exemplified by Kulz's (2017) study.

For many schools in recent years this has meant that dominant values and structures are imposed as if they are natural. Atkinson's (2011) identification of school ethos as doxic draws attention to the way that ideological assumptions underpin school practices. For example, academic pathways are privileged, parents are expected to support home learning, ability grouping is commonplace and education is positioned in service to the economy.

A continuum therefore exists for how school ethos can operate: at one end as a mechanism for social justice and at the other as a tool for power and conformity. In my analysis I locate the three schools on this continuum and argue that their position has a bearing on how white working-class students experience school. School ethos affects what students feel about themselves and about school. When it is used to

control and impose dominant values, some groups of students are marginalised. Whereas when it is a part of a process of forging shared values and navigating identity, it can contribute to a sense of belonging. The distance between official and felt ethos is indicative, as is the value attributed to the social and emotional aspects of learning. This brings us back to the role of social interaction and the primacy of felt experience foregrounded in Allder's (1993) definition.

What happens in the classroom is strongly influenced by school ethos and, as the place where students spend most of their day, is key to how they feel about school. The next section therefore focuses on the literature about pedagogy, how it is influenced by school ethos and the effect it has on students' engagement.

Pedagogy

Understanding how children learn and the best ways to teach them have been the focus of much scholarly work over the last century. From Piaget and Vygotsky through Bernstein to the cognitive science studies of more recent times, there have emerged both accepted knowledge and aspects which are hotly contested. Many people agree that for effective learning to happen, a learner needs to be actively engaged in the process (Griffith & Burns, 2014), to practise the skill or application of knowledge (Gladwell, 2008) and to feel safe to make mistakes (Dweck, 2012). However there has been debate about the balance between teacher instruction and student led activity with attendant discussion about the role of talk and collaborative learning (Hempel-Jorgensen, Cremin, Harris, & Chamberlain, 2018; Mercer, 2015). Related to pedagogy, there has also been debate about what should be taught (J. Yandell, 2017) and how students should be organised (B. Francis et al., 2020).

The implications of pedagogies for different socioeconomic groups are a concurrent area of investigation. Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen's (2012) work on socially just pedagogies reveals a tendency towards a 'pedagogy of poverty' whereby classroom practices in working-class schools are markedly different from those in middle-class primary schools. They find that working-class students are given little agency or time

to talk, lessons are heavily controlled by the teacher and the emphasis is on performance and passive obedience. In contrast, middle-class children are encouraged to articulate ideas, follow their interests and given more agency in their learning, leading to greater intrinsic motivation. These observations are borne out by other studies such as those by Reay (2017), who calls attention to the injustice of giving private school students the kinds of opportunities for creativity, critical thinking and agency that are repressed in the *'military'* (Reay, 2017, p.59) style academies more often attended by working-class students.

Lupton (2005) and Hempel-Jorgensen and Lupton's (2012) work discuss the contextual constraints on schools which lead to these different pedagogies and the ways in which performance pressure and the current high stakes accountability system exacerbates difficulties. Riordan and Jopling (2021) support these findings about the importance of contextual factors. They argue that data is often interpreted crudely without acknowledging schools' contexts and that this hides the complexity of what makes the greatest difference to disadvantaged students.

Whilst the Education Endowment Fund (2019) states that *'Good teaching is the most important lever schools have to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils'*, Riordan and Jopling (2021) point out that their evidence for this claim is *'based on five studies regarding the variability of teachers, none [of which] compare the impact of good teaching on students from different socio-economic backgrounds.'* Their research in 32 secondary schools finds that students from higher socioeconomic groups benefit most from improvements in teaching and learning, but that aspects of school related to ethos are more likely to have a significant impact on students from lower socioeconomic groups. This is not to say that high quality teaching and learning is not important for all students but that other, equally important aspects of the schooling experience, such as an ethos which values pupil voice and uses mixed attainment groupings, also affect academic success.

As suggested by Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) and others, schools serving disadvantaged communities, under pressure to secure examination results, tend to make performance driven pedagogical decisions. These are designed to get through a content heavy curriculum in the most efficient way, which often includes removing

problematic students into lower sets, a reliance on teacher instruction and emphasis on discipline. Such decisions are driven by contextual challenges and a school ethos which reflects hegemonic values, despite evidence which suggests that such pedagogy and practice exacerbate rather than reduce social inequality. For example, the 'Best practice in grouping students' study (B. Francis et al., 2020) demonstrates that setting practices have a negative impact on progress, pedagogy and self-confidence in ways which disproportionately affect working-class and ethnic minority students. Archer et al. (2018) suggests that ability grouping thus constitutes a form of symbolic violence against those already marginalised by the system and is perpetuated as a doxic practice by those who most benefit from it.

In conclusion, pedagogy and school ethos work together to impact the engagement and achievement of working-class students. Pedagogies are determined by school ethos and both are influenced by contextual factors and the educational landscape. Ironically, socially just pedagogies are less likely to operate in working-class schools even though they are most needed in such contexts. My research contributes to the discussion about which pedagogies foster engagement and progress for white working-class students and which act as barriers. In doing so it considers the relationship between pedagogy and ethos and how both are shaped by forces beyond the school gates.

Social and learner identity

The way that learning happens in the classroom affects how students feel about themselves as learners and therefore how effectively they learn. However, this is also affected by the social identity which students bring with them into the classroom and the interaction between their social identity and the educational discourses within the school.

Identity is a product of habitus, from the initial home habitus in which children grow up to other significant contexts, such as the institutional habitus of school or university. Ingram's study (2009) demonstrated the impact of different institutional

habitus on the identity of working-class boys from the same locality and the interaction between personal and social identity. For the boys in both schools, their sense of self comes from aligning themselves with one social identity and distancing themselves from another, even when this involves internal conflict.

This process of defining oneself in relation to an 'other' is exemplified by Stahl (2017) in his exploration of how white working-class boys use the practice of 'othering' to reaffirm their conceptions of a normative identity. Hollingworth and Williams (2009) study the same process in reverse: how working-class students are 'othered' as 'chavs' by their peers.

Hollingworth's (2015) study of youth subculture in one school illustrates how institutions can privilege some group identities (the white middle-class 'smokers') and undermine others (the black working-class 'football crowd'). Some social identities are seen as compatible with academic success whilst others are set in opposition to it. This is in part because of how a school positions social groups in relation to a normative ideal learner (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015; D. Youdell, 2006), and in part how the groups themselves perceive their relationship to education.

Such positioning sets up hierarchies which affect how students feel about themselves as learners. Within and between school segregation constitute structurally enshrined hierarchies which demonstrate the impact of such distinctions. The work of Francis et al (2020) on grouping and Archer & Hollingworth (2010) on urban schools show how students variously internalise or reject, align or distance themselves from the implicit judgements made about them by their presence in a certain set or school.

Learner identity can denote the way a student feels about themselves as a learner and their orientation to learning (Pollard and Filer 1996, Stobart 2008, von Stumm et al 2009 cited Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012) and has implications for academic success and social inclusion (D. Youdell, 2006). It is affected by social identity (inflected by class, race and gender), pedagogy, school ethos and experiences of learning outside school.

Various academics (Hollingworth and Archer, 2010; Stahl, 2013; Warin, 2010) have used the term learner identity in conjunction with Bourdieusian concepts. My usage echoes theirs. The way a student feels about themselves as a learner is influenced by the interaction between home and institutional habitus, the capitals they have available and how these are (mis)recognised in the field of school. However, the term learner identity is also compatible with other conceptual frameworks, such as the way Hempel-Jorgensen (2009, 2012) employs it in her Bernsteinian analysis of pedagogy. It is thus a flexible term which facilitates discussion of how structural factors and societal forces affect individual self-perception in the context of education.

The interaction between social identity and school practices affect learner identity right from the early years. Moss (2007) introduces her analysis of literacy and gender with the observation:

'the decisive influence on young children's development as readers lay with their encounter with schooled literacy and what it comes to stand for within their peer networks and communities' (Moss 2007 p.10)

Here she draws attention to the way that literacy pedagogy shapes what reading and writing mean for different groups. For example, the reading identity of a boy who is drawn to comics and non-fiction is undermined in a school which valorises fiction. The work of Hempel-Jorgensen et al (2018) demonstrates that in schools dominated by 'pedagogy of poverty' in which teachers focus on the performative aspects of reading rather than student talk and volition, students (especially boys) have low levels of engagement with reading. Although 'reading for pleasure' pedagogy (Cremin et al, 2014) has been shown to increase both enjoyment and proficiency for all socioeconomic groups, the performance culture in such schools stymies implementation and has a damaging effect on students' orientation to reading.

The work of Hempel-Jorgensen and Lupton (2012) and Hempel-Jorgensen (2009) brings together a range of scholarly work to illustrate how pedagogies of poverty have a negative impact on learner identity and how this tends to disproportionately affect students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Students in these contexts tend to be passive, discipline oriented, to perceive compliance as a feature of an

ideal learner and to have internalised a sense of blame for personal or collective failure. This is in contrast to students in more middle-class settings used to child-centred competence pedagogies which result in learner identities characterised by active engagement, curiosity, independence and confidence.

Learner identities are also affected by the gendered aspect of social identity. In their reassessment of gender and achievement, Francis and Skelton (2005) point out that current conceptions of an ideal learner have a mix of typically masculine and feminine traits, such as active engagement and obedience:

'Holding these often opposing attributes together raises tensions which may have particularly problematic psychic implications for the self that is its own 'entrepreneur' (Francis and Skelton, 2005, p.126)

They show how upper- and middle-class students can draw on a range of socially acceptable identities to reconcile potential conflicts between academic and social expectations. For example, the rationality and competitive masculinity of upper-class boys or the career oriented emancipated femininity of middle-class girls. However, it is harder for working-class students.

Various academics (Reay, 2002; Evans, 2006; Stahl, 2013; Travers, 2017) have explored the difficulties that white working-class boys face in their attempts to reconcile academic achievement with conceptions of masculinity based on physical prowess in which 'book learning' is seen as 'feminine' and 'soft'. Through Shaun's story, Reay (2002) details the psychic cost of maintaining social credibility at the same time as living up to the aspirations for school success held by him and his mother. For the boys in Evans's (2006) ethnography, school practices are so antithetical to their social identity that they are consigned to academic failure from the start.

Many of the academically successful white working-class young men in Travers' (2017) study take shelter in the safety of PE as a socially acceptable discipline and thereby turn sporting capital into academic capital. Those who study sports science at university are able to use what she terms *'flexible masculinities'* to construct more

nuanced notions of masculinity than traditionally exist. However, success has been dependent on resolving a conflict between social and learner identities.

Different but comparable difficulties exist for girls. Jackson's (2006) study of predominantly white British girls charts the rise of 'ladettes' characterised by excess, overt sexuality, shamelessness and brashness. This social identity interferes with the construction of a strong learner identity as students exhibit rebellious behaviour and are distracted from academic study. Jackson points out that the penalties are far more severe for working-class than middle-class ladettes. She invokes Skeggs's (2004) work to explain how the latter, as 'cultural omnivores' can knowingly and flexibly participate in a wide variety of cultures whilst working-class girls are fixed within a disadvantaged class location.

Archer et al (2007) make a similar distinction between middle- and working-class girls in their analysis of how working-class heterosexual femininity is positioned and read as antithetical to educational discourse. Whether the enactment is perceived as overly sexual or preoccupied with attainment of respectability through 'settling down' with husband and children, working-class femininity does not conform to the 'good pupil subject position'. Archer et al (2007) note the profound negative impact that having a boyfriend has on these girls' engagement with school, how such performances of femininity are regulated by the peer group and how the quest for capital plays into oppressive patriarchal systems. This draws attention to the interaction between social and learner identity and the difficulties presented by the classed and gendered position of white working-class girls.

Warin (2010) in her exploration of identity capital, and Stahl (2013) in his discussion of reflexivity, suggest that individuals who can create a narrative of the self are better equipped to resolve identity conflicts but that this ability is more developed by a middle-class habitus. The white working-class boys in Stahl's study are '*reflexive losers*' who '*idealise students who can balance the learner and social identity*' (Stahl, 2013 p.9). Warin (2010) advocates investment in the social and emotional aspects of learning and explicit opportunities to develop identity capital as strategy to redress this balance. Francis and Skelton's (2005) suggestion of dismantling gender stereotypes as a way of enabling both boys and girls to nurture a strong learner

identity free from the constraints of gendered aspects of social identity is congruent with this approach.

The literature therefore details how it is difficult for working-class students to find a social identity which supports a positive learner identity in the context of a school which marginalises their social identity, uses pedagogies which do not nurture a strong learner identity and lacks the investment in the social and emotional aspects of learning which would help to resolve identity conflicts. My research contributes to work in this field by analysing factors which seem to weaken and those which have the capacity to strengthen how students feel about themselves as learners.

The parent school relationship

Social and learner identity are shaped before children arrive at school by their home context. Continuities and dissonances between a child's experience of home and school contribute to a sense of belonging and development of learner identity (Warin, 2010). The relationship between parents and school is important in helping pupils navigate the field of school and resolve potential conflicts or difficulties (Lareau, 2003/2011). However, parents' own social and learner identities affect this process by mediating messages and narratives from and about school and determining the level and effectiveness of communication between home and school (Vincent, 2001; Crozier & Reay, 2005).

A common factor identified in Travers's (2017) study of academically successful white working-class young men was a supportive home in which a parent or other significant adult nurtured reading habits, encouraged their child to study and had a strong sense of the value of higher education. These traits are typical of middle-class parenting but have become normalised as 'good practice' (see advice routinely given to parents by schools about daily reading with their child and support of home learning). Echoing Youdell's work (2003) on intelligible learners, certain forms of parental support and ways of engaging with school are thus intelligible and others are less so. These forms are classed and raced but presented as neutral.

Lareau's seminal work, *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), coined the terms '*concerted cultivation*' to refer to the cultural logic of childrearing prevalent in middle-class American homes, and '*the accomplishment of natural growth*' to refer to that in working-class homes. She demonstrates how the cultural logic of these approaches, coupled with the social and cultural capital of the parents, results in significant differences in the way that parents interact with school as well as in the way that the parent's role in formal learning is positioned within the home. Middle-class parents tend to actively promote the skills and attributes they perceive as necessary for academic and professional success such as verbal reasoning, study skills and confidence interacting with unfamiliar adults and peers. They have a sense of entitlement and types of capital which mean that they proactively engage with their child's school and more easily secure educational advantage than working-class parents.

In contrast, the accomplishment of natural growth involves provision for the child's basic needs (food, shelter, love), investment in community relationships and belief in children's ability to independently navigate their free time. A sense of constraint, the perception of formal learning as within the school's domain, and a lack of capitals recognised by the education system mean that there is less interaction with the school and more frustration and fear in attempts to secure any additional support needed for their child. These two approaches therefore result in differences in the relationships between home and school as well as, to some extent, the relationships between child and family.

Such class differences are supported in research by other academics, including Vincent (2001), who is interested in more finely graduated differences between groups. Her investigation of the ways in which different fractions of the middle-class interact with school demonstrates that levels of parental education and current occupation correlate to the degree of agency that parents experience in their relationship with their child's school.

Crozier and Reay (2005) corroborate this finding and draw attention to the way in which parental involvement has become enshrined in policy in a way which leads to greater inequality. The normalisation of middle-class parenting practices mean that

schools expect parents to support their child's learning through activities in the home and a particular type of engagement with the school. Those who do not are viewed through a deficit lens rather than with a recognition that a different and equally valid cultural logic may be at work.

The parents of the white working-class students in my research illustrate a range of home-school relationships. I use the insights outlined above to make sense of parents' views and feelings and to understand the effect that the home-school relationship has on each student's experience of school. This includes how parents and their children see school in relation to life beyond it and how the school responds to the aspirations that students bring with them.

Aspirations

Discourses of aspiration are intimately bound up with the ideology of neoliberal meritocracy. The premise of this form of meritocracy is that upward social mobility can be secured through hard work and talent, regardless of socioeconomic background. It also rests on the assumption that upward social mobility is a universal desire and ignores ideological and empirical complications. Governments from Thatcher through Blair to May have presented meritocracy as the founding principle of their approach to social equality (Littler, 2017; Bradbury, 2021). Blair's emphasis on education (1996) and the relentless onslaught of policy interventions which this set in motion frames education as the engine of social mobility. The focus on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome supposes that if education provision is good enough, everyone has an equal chance of socioeconomic success. Outcomes are therefore dependent on individual effort.

However, academics such as Goldthorpe (2013) have questioned this logic, in part because it rests on a misunderstanding about social mobility. The upward mobility which occurred in the post-war years was due to structural changes in the labour market which facilitated greater absolute mobility. However, relative mobility was largely unchanged. When politicians lament a decline in social mobility, they confuse

the two and thereby erroneously believe that the type of mobility which occurred because of structural change can be obtained by a higher qualified workforce. Although Goldthorpe believes it is valuable to invest in education for its own sake, he argues that it will have limited impact on social mobility. Instead, he suggests that a fluid and open society would be more effectively achieved by focusing on equality of condition.

This view is supported by the work of Perry and Francis (2010), Reay (2017) and others who suggest that greater attention is needed to the structural inequalities which constrain individuals regardless of their effort. In *Against Meritocracy*, Littler (2017) traces its genealogy. She demonstrates how meritocracy has become an integral part of neoliberalism and is used by those with power as a way of legitimising privilege and inequality. It gives rise to '*cruel optimism*' (Berlant, 2012 cited in Littler, 2017) in that the working-class are placated with the false promise of possible upward mobility. Indeed, the phrase '*the myth of meritocracy*' calls attention to its distance from reality (Reay, 2017; Littler 2017).

Government policy, educational discourse and popular media (Adams, 2018; Allen, 2014; Hoskins & Barker, 2017) have presented 'raising aspirations' as a simple solution to the issue of white working-class underachievement: if they would play the game of meritocracy and aspire to middle-class jobs, they would do better in school. However, various academics have used empirical studies to problematise this notion. I will outline four key arguments. Firstly, people naturally tend to reproduce the habitus in which they grew up. Secondly, educational institutions invalidate working-class aspirations. Thirdly, 'psychic reparative work' (Reay 2002) is involved in moving between social classes. Finally, there are structural barriers to class mobility.

Social reproduction and aspirations

The work of Archer (2012) and Hoskins and Barker (2017) draw on Bourdieu's ideas about habitus to illustrate how family background and history has a far greater influence on students' aspirations than school and that the overwhelming tendency is towards social reproduction. This is at odds with the assumptions of policy makers

that working-class people wish to become middle-class. Such assumptions ignore the patronising nature of this stance and gloss over *‘the ontological insecurity experienced by those who are subject to a cacophony of calls to ‘become someone’ when this is modelled on the image of ‘someone else’*” (Allen, 2014).

The devaluation of working-class culture and aspirations

Whilst the system encourages middle-class students to follow in their parents’ footsteps, working-class students are implicitly urged to reject their backgrounds. Allen’s (2014) focus on girls at a performing arts school details how aspirations are *‘read, regulated and shaped’* (Allen 2014 p.8) by an institution which devalues working-class culture. This gives rise to fear and anxiety about class position which is viewed in contrast to the sense of entitlement experienced by middle-class students whose tastes and aspirations are institutionally approved.

Spohrer’s (2016) study in a Scottish secondary school similarly finds that the way success is presented implicitly devalues working-class lives and frames some choices as better than others. Such messages can be conveyed overtly but also through *‘micro-interactional processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation’* (Lareau, 2003 p.2) and gives rise to complex feelings and ways of being. Students who have working-class aspirations which are not supported by school may not see the relevance of education to their vocational goals (Strand and Winston, 2008 p.264 cited in Stahl, 2016 p.666) – a process exacerbated by intergenerational experience (Willis, 1977). This may prompt disengagement or appear as lack of aspiration because the institution does not encourage students to voice what it perceives as ‘low aspirations’.

‘Psychic reparative work’

Various academics have explored the *‘psychic landscape of class’* (Reay, 2005) for students grappling with identity conflicts at school (Reay, 2002; Warin, 2010; Stahl, 2016), for those trying to fit in at university (Travers, 2017; Reay, 2021) and those in the aftermath of a transition (Walkerdine et al., 2001; Travers, 2017; Reay, 2017). In his study of *‘White working-class male narratives of ‘loyalty to self’ in discourses of*

aspiration' (2016) Stahl suggests that a desire for ordinariness can be seen as a form of resistance to neoliberal achievement ideology and a way of navigating between the demands of learner and social identity. For the boys in his study, a socially upward identity is perceived as fake, a movement away from a true self. '*Averageness*' offers a way to satisfy the demands of school and remain true to an authentic self. A policy maker may perceive such students as having low aspirations without recognising the complexity of their situation.

Archer's (2007) analysis of young people's construction of capital through style and their consequent rejection of university because of its incompatibility with the performance of a fashionable identity represents another way of interacting with discourses of aspiration. Like the young women who secure feminine capital through heterosexual relationships, this strategy plays into oppressive social relations and excludes them from opportunities beyond their fixed classed position. However, both examples can be read as originating from an aspiration for respectability (Skeggs, 1997) and symbols of material wealth. The judgement that these aspirations are 'low' comes from a classed position which does not have to fight for either respectability or material ease and does not perceive the structural limitations which persist even for those who 'make it' to university.

Structural barriers

An ability to code switch and move flexibly between different classed contexts is a characteristic common to many working-class people who go to university (Stahl, 2016; Reay, 2021; Travers, 2017). However, the playing field is still not level. Reay (2021) details the difficulties faced by working-class students at university as they navigate fields in which they feel unprepared or unwelcome. Skeggs (2004) writes about the way that the value of capital is dependent on which body carries it. Even upon graduating, the same undergraduate degree will result in different opportunities for middle- and working-class young people. In the context of university fees, student debt, grade inflation and graduate unemployment, institutionally approved 'high aspirations' may not seem as attractive or feasible as those with the power to preach meritocracy would suggest.

The issue of aspirations and its relevance to the underachievement of white working-class students is therefore complex. The notion that raising aspirations will solve the

problem is simplistic and insulting. The IOE debate about social mobility (B. Francis, 2017) covered much of the ground outlined above and demonstrated the ideological and empirical complications which surround a term which is used as if it were a straightforward answer to social equality. The contributors questioned the idea that being working-class is something to escape from, why middle-class occupations are viewed as inherently more valuable than working-class ones, whether meritocracy is possible in the current system, and the role of education in reducing inequality. My research engages with the questions raised in this debate by considering how schools feed narratives about aspirations, the effect this has on white working-class students and to what extent such students feel able to succeed academically and retain their working-class identity within the current educational landscape.

Conclusion

This chapter has set out how the white working-class fit into debates about class and race. The literature suggests that there is more that unites than divides the experience of working-class people from different ethnicities. However, the intersectional positions of particular groups (and individuals) can result in divergent interests and experiences. My research findings may therefore resonate with working-class groups of other ethnicities whilst being directly relevant to white working-class students who share a particular historical relationship with the education system. In charting some of the developments in British education from 1870 to the present day I have drawn attention to its persistently stratified nature, the shift towards a performative, market driven culture at the expense of the social and emotional aspects of learning, and the ways in which neoliberalism has justified a focus on individual rather than structural failure. I argue that this context disadvantages working-class students and has implications for the ways in which they engage with school. This is in part because educational policy shapes what is spoken about and valued. Policy interpretation and subsequent enactment therefore have a profound impact on school ethos. The literature provides a framework to make sense of the discrepancies which can exist between official ethos (what schools say they value) and the felt experience of students (and staff). My research explores the factors that contribute to such discrepancies, particularly for marginalised groups like the white working class, and how this can affect their

perception of education. The literature also explains how school ethos can be used as an instrument of control and conformity, or as a way to increase belonging and equity. The schools in my study occupy varying points along this continuum and I argue that their position has a bearing on white working-class students' experiences.

What happens in the classroom affects students' sense of themselves as learners. Socially just pedagogies, such as mixed attainment grouping and strategies to increase student agency, have been shown to reduce social inequalities. However, the pressure of contextual factors can push schools towards 'pedagogies of poverty' (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012) which negatively affect learner identity. Working-class students often grapple with conflicts between their social and learner identities – a process exacerbated by the ways in which schools legitimise some social groups and delegitimise others, and by the side-lining of the social and emotional aspects of learning. These insights help to make sense of my observations in relation to the pedagogies which help and hinder learning for white working-class students and the additional challenges they face in navigating social and learner identities.

The relationship between home and school is a manifestation of intergenerational economic and educational status and affects students' attitudes to school. Aspirations are similarly influenced by home and interact with the world of school in ways which can undermine working-class culture. Although 'raising aspirations' is often presented as a simple solution to improving the attainment of white working-class students, the reality is complex when fundamental assumptions, such as those about meritocracy, are questioned. My research explores these complexities for students with a range of aspirations, from those with the institutionally sanctioned aim to go to university, to those who feel that their working-class aspirations are not legitimated.

The literature discussed in this chapter guided my thinking as I planned my research and made sense of my findings. The following chapter details my methodology and includes some reflections on the fieldwork and myself as a researcher and so sets the scene for the findings discussed thereafter.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

In keeping with much research on class and race, this is a qualitative study within a social constructivist paradigm. While quantitative analysis is a vital way to identify patterns and raise questions (for example about the underachievement of White British FSM students), qualitative analysis is often needed to understand the complex social processes which give rise to such realities. In this research I therefore use a range of qualitative research tools to gain insight into the lived experiences of white working-class students at secondary school and the factors affecting their engagement and achievement.

Bourdieu interpreted the social world through case studies; through interviews and ethnographic work with families and individuals which shed light on how their thoughts, priorities, decisions, actions and situations were shaped by a complex set of immediate and historical influences. My work follows in the footsteps of Bourdieu and other sociologists as I seek to understand a particular phenomenon in a way which acknowledges the socially constructed nature of knowledge.

In this chapter, I start by setting out my position in relation to the cases at the centre of the study and how they were chosen. I then explain why a case study approach is appropriate for this research and the various tools I used in data collection. Next, I detail the process of data analysis and the reports it gave rise to. As with any investigation involving people, there were myriad ethical considerations. I spend some time discussing these before moving on to provide a pen portrait of each school and reflect on some striking moments in the fieldwork. Finally, I engage reflexively with my position as a researcher.

My role and the selection of schools

As mentioned in the Introduction, I am a teaching and learning consultant within a council School Improvement Team in the borough in which I did my fieldwork. This made it easier to secure participation from the three case study schools because we

already had a relationship which enabled them to trust my intentions and integrity. However, it also raised ethical issues as I had to navigate between my role as consultant and researcher. I will return to these considerations in the section on ethics later in this chapter.

Given that the impetus for the research was to investigate a real, local issue it seemed logical to focus on how the phenomenon played out in particular schools. More than one school was needed to tease out insights which might be generalisable beyond the institution. However, the project also needed to be manageable. Three seemed a sensible number. In the end two girls' schools and one boys' school participated. Two further schools were also approached, in an attempt to include a school which was mixed sex and an academy. However, consent was not forthcoming and so I was unable to consider the impact of a mixed sex environment or academy status.

My role within the council meant that I had access to data which helped in the selection process, such as the progress and attainment of White British FSM and non-FSM students. Such scrutiny was congruent with my role as a member of the School Improvement Team and aligned with the original purpose of the data collection. To further adhere to ethical guidelines, I ensured that the data I consulted was in an anonymised form.

A key selection criterion was that the schools were relatively successful, according to performance measures and Ofsted ratings. This was to reduce the number of variables affecting white working-class engagement and achievement. Another criterion was that they should be schools where pupils on the whole are doing relatively well, but White British FSM pupils are below the school average in relation to progress and attainment. The three schools selected met these criteria.

Case studies

I will now explain why a case study approach was appropriate for this research. A case study is:

'a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence' (Yin, 2009).

In this project the phenomenon is the engagement and achievement of white working-class students, the real-life context is the classroom/school and the sources of evidence were generated by a range of research tools: interviews with school staff, students and parents, my fieldnotes and teachers' notes.

Merriam states:

'The end product of a case study is a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study. Case studies include as many variables as possible and portray their interaction often over a period of time.' (Merriam, 1988).

My research data did indeed produce a quantity of 'rich' information about the interaction between white working-class students and a particular environment. In two schools, it happened that data on one student was collected from multiple sources (see diagrams on pages 102-4). However, even students who were only 'seen' through one or two research tools contributed to a 'rich' picture from which emerged repeating patterns and particularities which prompted different perspectives and lines of questioning.

Each case was therefore both instrumental and part of a collective: findings from each case were used separately and together to understand the wider phenomenon (Stake, 2003). This project involved nested case studies: each school was a case study, but each student was also a case study. Here, information about the students in isolation is not as useful as the same information within a full context of the school they attend. The rich data collected at individual and institutional level therefore worked together to provide valuable insights.

Research tools

I used a range of research tools to investigate the issue recursively. Below is a table which summarises the data set collected in each school.

Staff	Students	Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus group interview x 3• Case study notes: 1 or 2 students per member of staff (total 4-8)• SLT interview x 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus group interview x 2• Field notes from tracked days, each with one student x 8• Post tracked day interviews x 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parent interviews 2 or 3

In the summer term of 2018, I arranged to carry out a pilot project to test my research tools in a school I will refer to as School C. This was sufficiently successful to enable me to use most of the data in the final analysis, along with a further term's work in the school during the main fieldwork. It did however prompt me to refine the process through which students were selected by the school and articulate more clearly how I conceptualised 'white working class'. In the pilot project I asked the school to select students who were White British and eligible for FSM. As well as two year 7 students who could be classified as white working-class, it resulted in the selection of a second-generation Albanian student and a student whose way of speaking and bearing was middle-class but who had low-income parents. Neither were the target group I had in mind. Both students were on track for high levels of attainment and were not likely to contribute to the underachievement of the White British FSM group which was under investigation. I disregarded the data from these two students and subsequently asked to talk through the list of White British FSM students with the link senior leader in each school to eliminate this type of selection error. This was an effective adjustment.

I will now explain the methods I used in each school to investigate my research questions. These involved: student focus groups; teacher focus groups; observing

selected students over the course of two school days – a process I term ‘tracking’; individual interviews with students, parents and a member of the senior leadership team; and discussion of case study notes made by the focus group teachers. All face-to-face interviews (the vast majority) were audio-recorded and transcribed to allow for further reflection and analysis.

After the pilot, from January to December 2019, I arranged to carry out fieldwork in each school over the course of two terms and set this up so that I was only working in two schools at any one time. This was a practical decision related to my available time, but I believe it also helped me to immerse myself without becoming overwhelmed with thoughts about all three schools in my head simultaneously.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the research questions are:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values and ethos of the three secondary schools in Burrington and how are they conveyed?
2. How do these values and ethos interact with white working-class identities and experiences of school?
3. What are the prevailing pedagogic practices in each school and how are they experienced by white working-class students?

Student focus groups

The first step was to work with a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), using specified criteria, to identify a focus group of 5-8 students from Year 7 (start of KS3) and Year 10 (start of KS4). Both are important transition years and provide a vantage point from which to view the particularities of each key stage and how students experience the challenges and opportunities involved. This senior leader was chosen by the Headteacher during the initial access agreement and remained my link person throughout the fieldwork.

I met with each student focus group for roughly one hour and used a semi-structured interview to elicit their impressions of and feelings about the school and their learning opportunities (see Appendix D for interview schedules). They had been told I was

interested in the school experiences of White British students. However, their FSM status was not mentioned to avoid stigmatisation. I chose a focus group to explore the collective phenomenon of being a white working-class student in each school, to reveal divergent experiences and opinions as well as the recurrence of certain issues (Robson & Robson, 2016, p. 289). In addition, focus groups can encourage participation from individuals who may be reluctant to speak on a one-to-one basis and be an effective way of discussing taboo subjects, such as class-based discrimination (ibid p.285). I chose open questions within a semi-structured schedule to give freedom and flexibility to the discussion but to ensure that key areas of research interest were covered. As noted by Robson, beliefs and attitudes can be particularly difficult to uncover (p.272). Use of probes and prompts were useful as well as the recognition that focus groups were used in conjunction with observation and a range of individual interviews such that beliefs and attitudes were recursively understood from a range of angles.

A final reason to employ focus groups here was to personally meet and talk with potential students for the next stage in the research: individual tracking and interview. The focus group enabled me to identify students of particular interest, because they seemed particularly positive or negative about school, particularly talkative or quiet, or neutral but said or did something which caught my attention. It also enabled me to talk about the reasons, process and time commitment of the next stage, to provide space for questions and ascertain willingness to participate. Individuals then opted-in via a private slip of paper. This was an effective strategy chosen to reduce pressure or peer effect; each focus group included students who wanted to be tracked, who did not want to and who didn't mind. From those who opted in, I selected a range of students in terms of their attitude to school and academic attainment. The latter information was provided by the link SLT person.

Teacher focus groups

At the beginning of the fieldwork in each school, I also recruited 4-6 interested teachers to meet for one hour at the beginning, middle and end of the two-term period. I did this by providing each link SLT person with a blurb to be used in an email or staff briefing, an information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form

(Appendix B) to share with the whole staff. Those who volunteered were almost all classroom teachers, some of whom had additional responsibilities such as being Head of Department. There was one member of staff who had pastoral responsibilities but no subject teaching.

These teachers were instrumental to the research as they provided a range of professional perspectives on the issues and a longer-term insight into white working-class engagement and achievement than I could gain from two days of tracking each student. I met teachers in school-based focus groups and used open questions within a semi-structured interview to discuss their impressions and feelings about the values of the school, their thoughts about the issue of white working-class engagement and achievement and any insights into the kinds of pedagogies they believed were helpful or unhelpful. The groups comprised teachers from different subject areas who would not usually work together. This heterogeneity provided a range of viewpoints and the opportunity for participants to see issues in a different light (Robson, 2016). The sessions were carefully facilitated to ensure everyone had equal talk time and that differences of opinion were discussed constructively (ibid, p.289).

Towards the end of the first session each teacher nominated a student who they taught or worked with who they wanted to keep brief case study notes about over the next few months. The focus of these notes was the teachers' practice and the impact it had on students' learning. It was thus consistent with what they could be asked to do as part of their professional remit. I provided guidance and a simple template (Appendix C). In subsequent sessions I gave space for each teacher to reflect on their observations, drew out common themes and particularities for discussion and challenged any evidence of internalised prejudice. Teachers could choose someone who represented the type of student the school sees as often problematic in terms of engagement and achievement, or someone who differs from this 'typical' profile. This resulted in a useful range.

Although the intention was for the teacher to retain the same student throughout, in practice several had to change from one term to the next. This increased the chances that the same student would be chosen by more than one teacher. Indeed,

this happened in each school and gave rise to some interesting conversations. Teacher choice raised their motivation to complete the case study notes and they demonstrated a high commitment to this aspect. All reported that the process had given them greater insight into the factors which helped and hindered the learning of their student(s) and for all (except one) they felt that this teacher focus and the adjustments they made to their practice improved the students' engagement.

The empowering and stimulating aspects of focus group discussions were further reasons for selecting this method (Robson, 2016 p.285): teachers often appreciate the time and space to reflect on practice and discuss ideas, but opportunities can be rare, particularly for a heterogeneous group like this whose members may not otherwise meet.

Student tracking and interviewing

Another key aspect of the research was observing two Year 7 and two Year 10 students, each for two days, at spaced intervals. As explained, selection was informed by conversations with a member of SLT and student opt-in forms. These tracked students were case studies to investigate the phenomenon of white working-class engagement and achievement. As such, this approach strove:

'to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz 1973b) of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation'

As stated by Cohen *'One way of gathering more reliable data (for example about a particular student or group of students) is by tracking them through the course of a day'* (2007, p.403). I tracked each student in lessons for a day at a time using overt but unobtrusive observation. I had told students that I would watch them but also that I would sit away from and rarely talk to them. This produced a nuanced picture of a student's learning behaviour and gave insight into their cumulative experience through a day, instead of the more common isolated lesson observation.

Observation gives us direct access to actual behaviour. There can be discrepancies between what people say and do: observations can be used to *'corroborate the*

messages obtained in the interviews' (Robson 2016 p.312), or indeed contest or reveal complexity. This was the case, although happened the other way round in that the one-to-one interview at the end of each tracked day was an opportunity to work with each student to corroborate, contest and explore the interpretations of what I had seen the student doing.

I took a semi-structured approach to observation, which can '*provide a rich description of a situation'* (Cohen, 2007 p.398) by both working with an agenda and remaining open. The focus of my observation was the student's engagement and learning, the pedagogical tools used by the teacher and any significant social and emotional aspects. I took detailed field notes to capture critical incidents, particular behaviours, written and spoken language, non-verbal aspects, descriptions of the physical setting, learning activities and so on (Cohen, 2007 p.402-405). My role as educational consultant means that I have extensive experience of classroom observation, am adept at taking notes and disciplined to write these up into a comprehensive account as quickly after the event as possible (Robson, 2016 p.323). Observer bias and effect was reduced by minimal interaction, habituation and sitting a short distance away. I had my own copy of each student's timetable so was not dependent on them to take me from lesson to lesson. Indeed, my interaction with the tracked student was sufficiently minimal that other students rarely realised who I was observing. I did not track in break or lunch times in order to respect students' privacy, although we did talk in the interview about their experiences of these parts of the day.

At the end of each day (or as soon afterward as possible) I used a semi-structured schedule to interview each student on a one-to-one basis to provide them with an opportunity to comment on the day and to check their response to any of my observations. These were critical sources of data; what students said often corroborated my interpretations but also provided important additional pieces of information (such as about poor eyesight or physical discomfort) and opportunity to probe into significant aspects of their experiences and habits, such as levels of resilience or participation or social (dis-)ease. As Cohen notes:

'Participant observation is often combined with other forms of data collection that, together, elicit the participants' definitions of the situation and their organising constructs in accounting for situations and behaviours' (Cohen, 2007 p.405).

Where possible, I also talked briefly to any teacher observed about their reflections on the lesson and impressions of the student.

I tracked each student for another day a term later. This was to investigate similarities and differences over time and to take account of the way in which the mood of a student, a teacher or indeed the school on a particular day can affect engagement and achievement. The second day tended to corroborate findings from the first day and provided an opportunity to see how aspects of students' engagement had developed and so proved a valuable part of the data set.

Through post-observational interviews with both teachers and students, and focus group discussions, I triangulated my impressions. These research tools were designed to give voice to participants so that they were involved in the construction of meaning rather than passive subjects. As Kvale and Brinkmann put it: *'In the interview, knowledge is created 'inter' the points of view of the interviewer and the interviewee'* (2009, p. 123). For example, a discussion with one student about his reluctance to put up his hand in lessons revealed a complex interplay of social anxiety, teacher pedagogy and effect of absence/lack of confidence which enabled us both to go beyond the label of 'disengaged'. These insights complemented those gained from how he had spoken in the focus group (in front of his peers) and what his mother subsequently said in her interview.

Parental interviews

In the same letter sent home to parents to gain consent for their child to participate, I asked if they would be willing to be interviewed on a one-to-one basis at a time convenient to them. Parental viewpoint is an important source of information: parents know their children outside the educational establishment and are therefore in a position to see the effects of a school upon them in a way that teachers cannot;

parents' attitudes to education have a profound impact on the way their children interpret their own school experiences; school has been presented as a mediator between the family and the world of work so to understand this position it is important to have some insight into the familial context; the way in which the parents experience the school and teachers is likely to have a significant impact on their child's engagement.

A crucial aspect of the research has been the opportunity to give voice and agency to those who may feel marginalised. Parental interviews had the potential to provide such space. In her work with women, Oakley (1981) draws attention to the way in which the interview paradigm has changed from being a data collecting instrument for researchers to one for those whose lives are being researched. Bourdieu likewise points to the possible benefits for interviewees when he suggests that some:

'grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere' (1999, p.615).

I was keen for this to be the case. I made efforts to put interviewees at ease and redress any power imbalance, asking for their help to develop my understanding and encouraging them to elaborate by showing interest and leaving space for them to speak (Bourdieu & Ferguson, 1999; Wiggins, 2018).

The interviews used a semi-structured schedule to elicit parental views on the values of the school, the learning experiences of their children and their perceptions of the barriers and enablers to their engagement and achievement, including their own experience of communication with the school. All parents chose to have the interview conversation over the phone and spoke candidly about their thoughts and experiences in a way which provided insight into all the areas outlined above. I made the call from a school phone (situated in a private space) for data protection purposes as it allowed me to avoid having to record their phone number. However, the parents were clear that I was not a member of school staff.

SLT Interviews

During the fieldwork in each school, I conducted a one-to-one semi-structured interview with a member of the senior leadership team to find out their views on the values of the school and issues affecting white working-class engagement and achievement. This was to better understand the intended vision of the school and the perceptions of someone who has an overview of students' achievement in their school over time.

Below is a table which summarises participation information. A diagram of the participants in each school is presented together with the pen portraits later in this chapter.

Total numbers

Staff participants	Student participants	Parent participants	Interviews
20	60	7	51

Data analysis and reporting

I took an inductive approach to thematic analysis and allowed themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, my experience as a teacher and consultant and the academic reading I had done before the fieldwork meant that this process did not happen in an '*epistemological vacuum*' (ibid, p.84): I had prior knowledge of some potentially relevant issues and could see evidence of Bourdieu's mechanisms of social reproduction in educational practices. At the end of each tracked day and interview, I wrote summary notes to record what I saw as emerging themes. As I transcribed interviews, I also made notes of initial ideas in line with the first stage of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. This meant that before I reached the stage of formally coding the data, I had already identified some

significant themes (for example, relationships) and operationalised concepts (such as capital) to make sense of what I had observed.

All transcriptions were uploaded into Nvivo and I used this software to engage in an iterative (Cohen, 2007 p.493) or recursive (Braun and Clarke, 2006) coding process. I started by generating initial codes in response to the data and informed by my previous thoughts about it (open). Interpretation was through a Bourdieusian lens, but codes used school-based language to stay close to the data and increase specificity. For example, a comment about wanting to be a plumber was coded as 'aspirations' rather than 'habitus' even though the influence of home habitus on aspirations had framed the comment as significant. As themes emerged, I created parent nodes and collated the sub-nodes accordingly (axial). Finally, transcripts coded after this point were done so in line with these parent and sub-nodes (selective), though with the option to create additional nodes if something new arose. Data saturation point arose about three quarters of the way through the process.

The pilot project in School C enabled me to test out all stages of analysis, including a written outcome in the form of my upgrade document. It therefore allowed me to define and name the themes (stage 5 of the process set out by Braun and Clarke, 2006) which made subsequent coding of new data more streamlined. At various points I created thematic maps by moving pieces of paper around on the floor (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p.89) to work out how sub-themes relate to each other and to the main themes.

Once coding of the whole data set was complete, I used the matrix function in Nvivo to sort and view the data first by student and then by theme. For each student (tracked and teacher case study) I analysed enabling factors and barriers to their engagement and achievement and summarised these in one document. I then viewed the data collected under each theme for each school and made summary notes. This process enabled me to see patterns in the factors that helped and hindered engagement and achievement but also to keep sight of the individuality of each student, and school. The analysis chapters reflect this way of viewing the data in that they are organised thematically, but each chapter features one or two case studies to illustrate the key ideas.

At the end of the period of fieldwork in each school, I wrote a one-page summary of key findings and possible recommendations and met with the SLT link person to share and discuss these ideas about what could be done to improve the engagement and achievement of white working-class students in their school. This conversation was designed to increase agency and impact. As Robson argues:

'The people who will make use of the evaluation information should be closely involved in generating recommendations. They are more likely to act on things that they have thought out for themselves than on ideas foisted on them by an outside evaluation' (Robson, 2016 p.517)

As agreed at the start of the process, I then wrote up a specific technical report (Robson, 2016 p.154) for each school which was given in confidence to the SLT link person.

Burrington Council was both a partial sponsor and important stakeholder. When the school specific reports were complete, a full technical report was therefore written for Council leaders and managers to meet their reasonable demand for *'high quality, rigorous and usable research'* (Cohen, 2007 p.74). This 20,000 word report made links between the findings in each school and included a series of recommendations. Feedback on the whole project in this way maximised anonymity for schools and individual participants.

A summary of the findings was also presented in the form of a double-sided leaflet of *'Dos and Don'ts'* (see Appendix E) for a more general audience: school staff; participating staff; students; parents. This provided quick, easy to read key messages which could be disseminated in various ways; a handout for a presentation or training; an attachment to a letter or email. The intention was to use this leaflet to feedback to participating students and parents in person. However, the pandemic stymied this plan and instead I asked for it to be sent out with an accompanying letter. It is regrettable that I was unable to meet with the participants again in person to present the findings, engage in discussion and thank them again for their time.

Although this report writing for the schools and borough delayed the writing of my thesis, it was a useful part of the data analysis process in that it crystallised themes and identified illustrative examples. The analysis chapters in my thesis have their origins in the borough report. However, three sections in the latter (learner identity, teaching and learning, careers advice and guidance) became the two learner identity chapters in the thesis as the conceptual framework that held the sections together became apparent. I return to the impact of this dissemination in the concluding chapter.

Ethical considerations

The aim of this research was to improve educational experiences, empower those who may feel marginalised and enable schools to better understand how they can have a positive impact on white working-class pupils. However, every stage the research involved interacting with people about issues which may have been personal, contentious or difficult for a range of reasons. It therefore called for sensitivity and respect, an ability to see a situation from several viewpoints, a willingness to engage in dialogue and constant personal reflection. I asked people and institutions to open their experience to me and had to bear this in mind at all times.

To protect the welfare of all participants I ensured that everyone was given clear information about the project and their involvement right at the start (see Appendix A) and that consent was given freely without any coercion (see comments above about private opt-in slips for students, for example). I took care to convey that participants were free to withdraw at any point. Indeed, one teacher in each focus group did withdraw after the first interview, but all readily gave permission to use the data I had already collected when asked.

Steps were taken to preserve the anonymity of individuals and institutions wherever possible: I did not publicly acknowledge staff and student participants; I did not refer

to the schools by name in any conversation about the research; in written texts, pseudonyms were used for participants, schools and the borough and staff were not referred to by role; in the borough report, results on all three schools were presented together and no identifying information was given about any of the schools to further protect individuals and institutions.

The level of anonymity for staff and students was high. The only exception is that the link SLT person may sometimes have been able to match quotations to participants in their school report. This limitation was acknowledged in the consent form. Complete anonymity at institutional level is more difficult, given the ease of online searches. Once someone knows where I work, the identity of the borough is apparent and someone with a detailed knowledge of the schools in the borough who goes on to read my thesis could identify the participating schools. However, mitigations were put in place as far as possible.

Precautions were taken to keep data secure: all data was stored on encrypted devices; historical anonymised pupil level data was viewed only on council computers; all audio-recordings were deleted once transcribed; and teachers were asked not to put the name of their case study student on their weekly notes.

Students and parents needed to feel safe and free from judgement. As mentioned, a central concern of the project was to give voice to those who may feel marginalised by the education system. The interviews were therefore a crucial space to enable them to 'talk back' to a system which they may experience as dominating, silencing or simply uninterested in their subjective views. To encourage feelings of safety, I was aware of potential power dynamics and tried to make participants feel comfortable, engage in deep listening so that people felt heard, hold people in unconditional positive regard and provide opportunities for them to ask questions. I used my first name with everyone which I think helped them see me as separate from the school – an interested woman rather than a teacher – and reduced the distance between us that was occasioned by differences in class and capitals (Bourdieu, 1999 p.609).

I made sure that all interviews with pupils took place within the school day and did not involve them missing a lesson they particularly enjoyed. There were indications that this made them feel special and respected. I emphasised confidentiality (excepting safeguarding concerns) and asked students in focus groups to respect the confidentiality of the conversation amongst themselves. On two occasions, I did have a safeguarding concern which I raised with the link member of SLT.

In an educational climate of performance management, teachers also needed to feel safe and free from judgement, particularly those who were observed during the days when I tracked students. I therefore ensured that these teachers were informed in advance, were clear that my focus was the student, and were reassured that I would not talk about their lesson with anyone else. Indeed, I rarely knew the names of the teachers I observed and made no effort to find them out. The comments I make about pedagogy in my analysis are therefore separate from the identities of specific teachers.

Whilst I had anticipated that differences in hierarchy or identification as white working-class may create difficulties with power dynamics within the teacher focus groups, this was not the case. Nonetheless I took precautions to make sure that discussion was not dominated by particular individuals. For example, I invited each teacher to speak about their case study student uninterrupted for a stipulated number of minutes before either myself or the other teachers asked questions or made comments. The teachers referred to their case study student by name during these focus group sessions so that other teachers who knew or taught each student could contribute and potentially benefit from the discussion.

It is likely that the selection of a case study student influenced the amount of attention that the teacher gave to the student, maybe to the detriment of others. The literature points to the consistent marginalisation of white working-class students and the presence of unconscious negative bias. Also documented are strategies pupils from various backgrounds employ to monopolise teachers' attention (disruptive boys, vocal middle-class pupils). In part, the selection of case study students was intended to raise teachers' awareness of this group and to notice what arose when they focused their gaze on the factors affecting their engagement and achievement. Any

additional attention can therefore be viewed as redressing a balance. Or, if the student already demanded more than their fair share of attention, as a way of shifting the focus onto the triggers for attention seeking behaviour, or greater awareness of automatic teacher responses or internalized prejudices, in a way which provided the basis for longer term solutions. Indeed, this happened in several cases and may have paved the way for a deeper understanding of similar students in the future. Involvement in the research could thus be regarded as valuable professional development.

Over the course of the fieldwork, I spent two whole days with each tracked student and completed two one-to-one interviews. While part of this design was to develop a relationship which would facilitate greater insights, there were concomitant dangers: that students would develop an attachment to me which may make them feel disappointed or abandoned when the project ended, and/or that I would become emotionally involved in their education and welfare. To counter this I was clear about the research process and timescale at the start and provided structured closure for each student. I used reflective writing and talking to my partner (unconnected to the schools or borough) to process my own emotions. As detailed later in this chapter, these issues did arise on one occasion in which I felt divided between my duty to care and my role as a researcher.

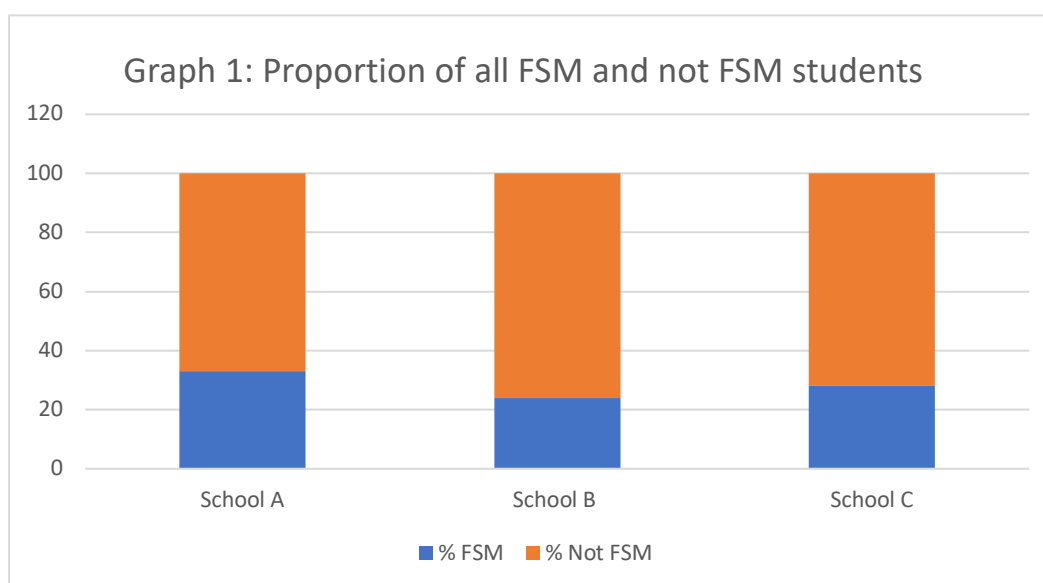
The research had a dual role: commissioned by the borough and for my thesis. It has been important to distinguish between these different purposes and audiences in the various forms of written analysis I have produced. My role as borough advisor also created some tension between this identity and that of researcher. To keep these roles as distinct as possible I did not wear my borough identification badge when in school for research purposes or engage in dialogue with anyone about borough related work. I also took care not to discuss aspects of my research findings with colleagues from the borough. Although the final borough report was shared more widely, each school specific report was confidential, given only to the SLT link person. This was done to reduce potential feelings of exposure and so make it easier to openly consider the findings without a need to defend the institution. Finally, care was taken in how I reported my findings to promote a forward-looking culture of working together rather than any sense of blame or failure.

These ethical considerations and more were detailed in the ethics form submitted for clearance before the fieldwork. Throughout the research process I kept in mind the principles of ethical research as set out in the BERA guidelines (2011) and by Rossman and Rallis (2010). These principles underlie the research design but were also used in the day-to-day decisions and actions, which necessarily occurred as I interacted with a range of people in the course of the project.

School pen portraits

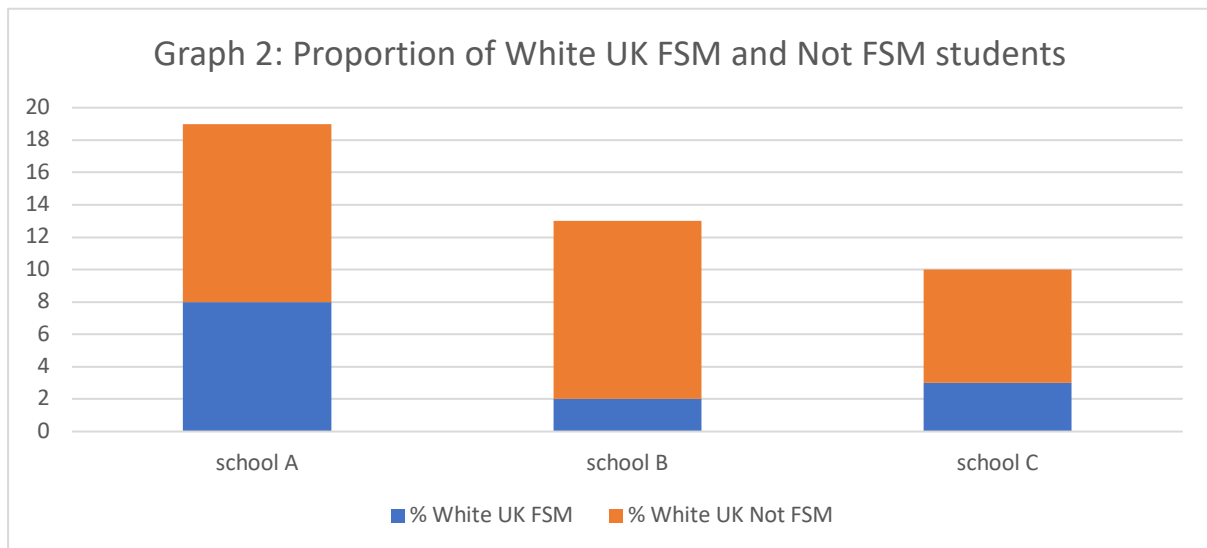
I will now provide some information about the three participating schools to set the scene for the reflections on fieldwork which follow and the analysis chapters thereafter. I start with four graphs which present statistical information about the cohort who obtained GCSE results in 2018, which is the data set I used to inform my selection.

The first graph shows the proportion of FSM and not FSM students. 20-40% of students in this cohort in each school were eligible for FSM. The proportion of FSM students in each school has increased since 2018.

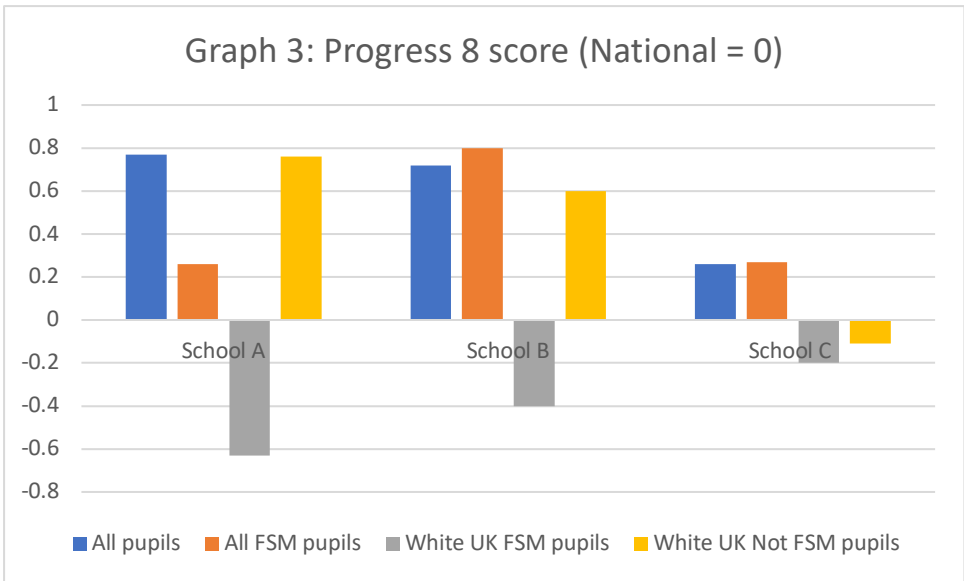


The second graph shows the proportion of White UK students, split into FSM and not FSM. When I did my fieldwork in 2019, the year 7 and year 10 cohorts with whom I

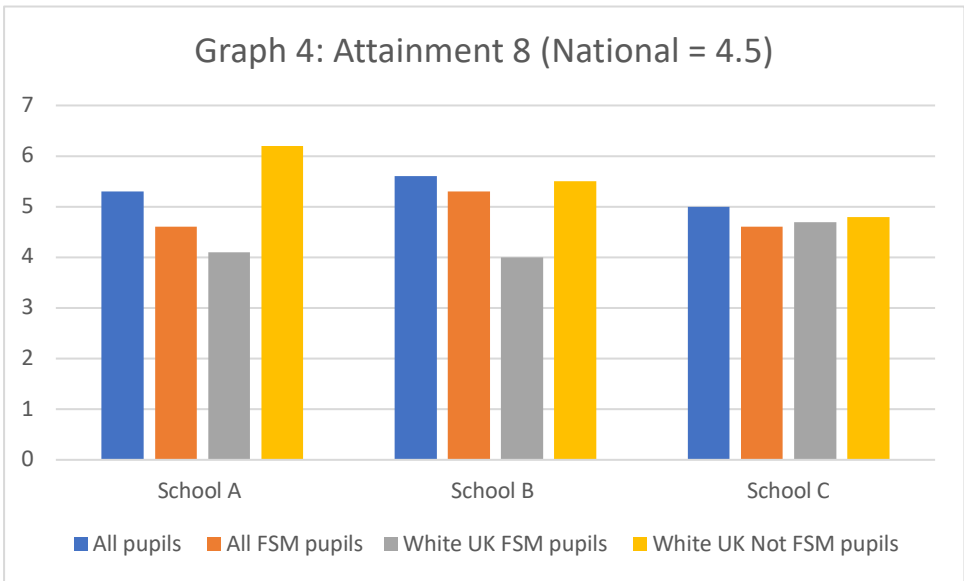
was working in Schools B and C had a higher proportion of White UK students than in these 2018 cohorts.



The third graph provides information about the Progress 8 score for various groups. In all three schools, the Progress 8 score is negative for White UK FSM pupils, which echoes the national picture. This means that students in this group tend to make less progress from KS2 to KS4 than those with similar KS2 scores. The graph below shows that they attain between one and two GCSE grades lower than students from other groups. School A and B have higher overall Progress 8 scores than School C but there are larger gaps between White British FSM pupils and other groups than at School C.



The final graph shows the Attainment 8 scores for the same groups. As with the Progress 8 scores, gaps between White UK FSM pupils and other groups are larger in Schools A and B.

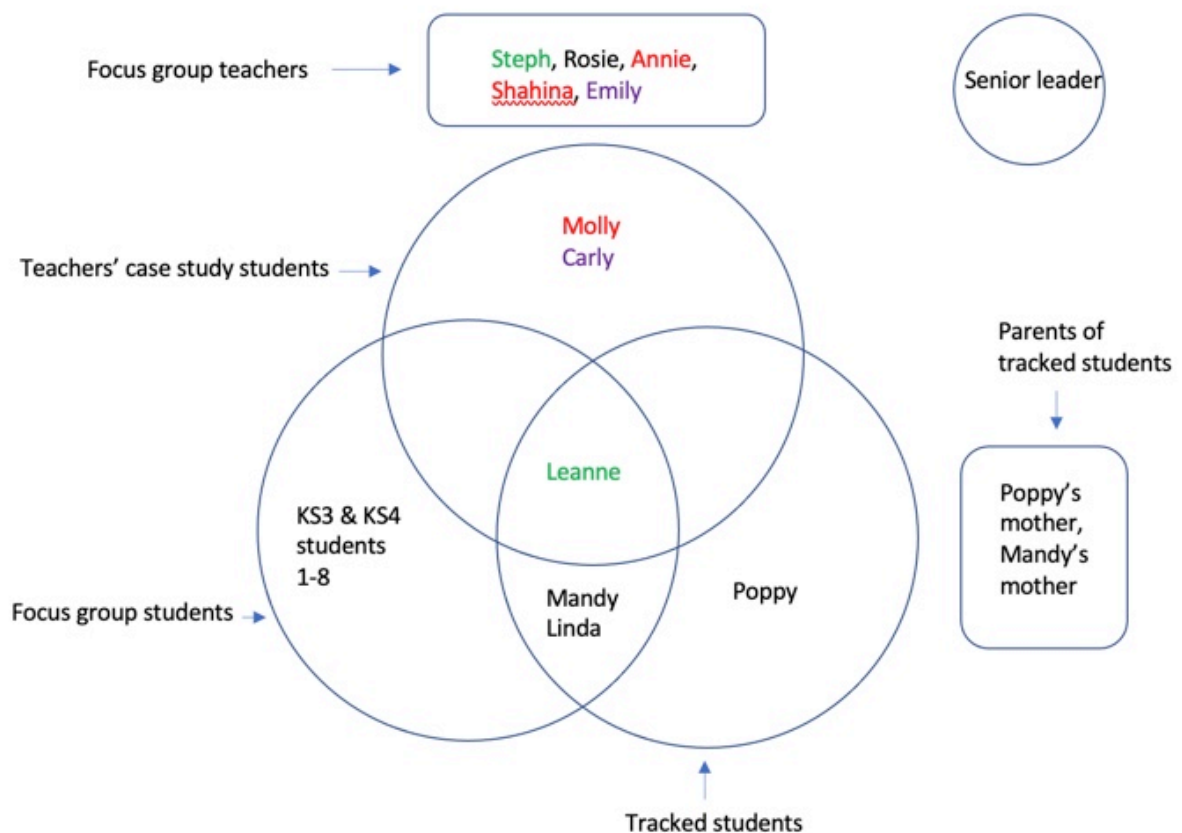


I will now give a pen portrait of each of the three schools. Each portrait is followed by a diagrammatic representation of the participants in that school. All schools are comprehensive and state funded. All names are pseudonyms.

School A is a high achieving girls' school. Although it has gone through difficult periods, it is currently well regarded in the community and is heavily oversubscribed. The White UK group includes students from both middle and working-class backgrounds. As can be seen from the graphs above, GCSE attainment within this group is polarised with large gaps between the progress and attainment of FSM and non-FSM students. The school sees the engagement and achievement of White British FSM students as a key area of challenge. At the time of the fieldwork, this group were disproportionately represented in exclusion and persistent absence data.

Participants in School A

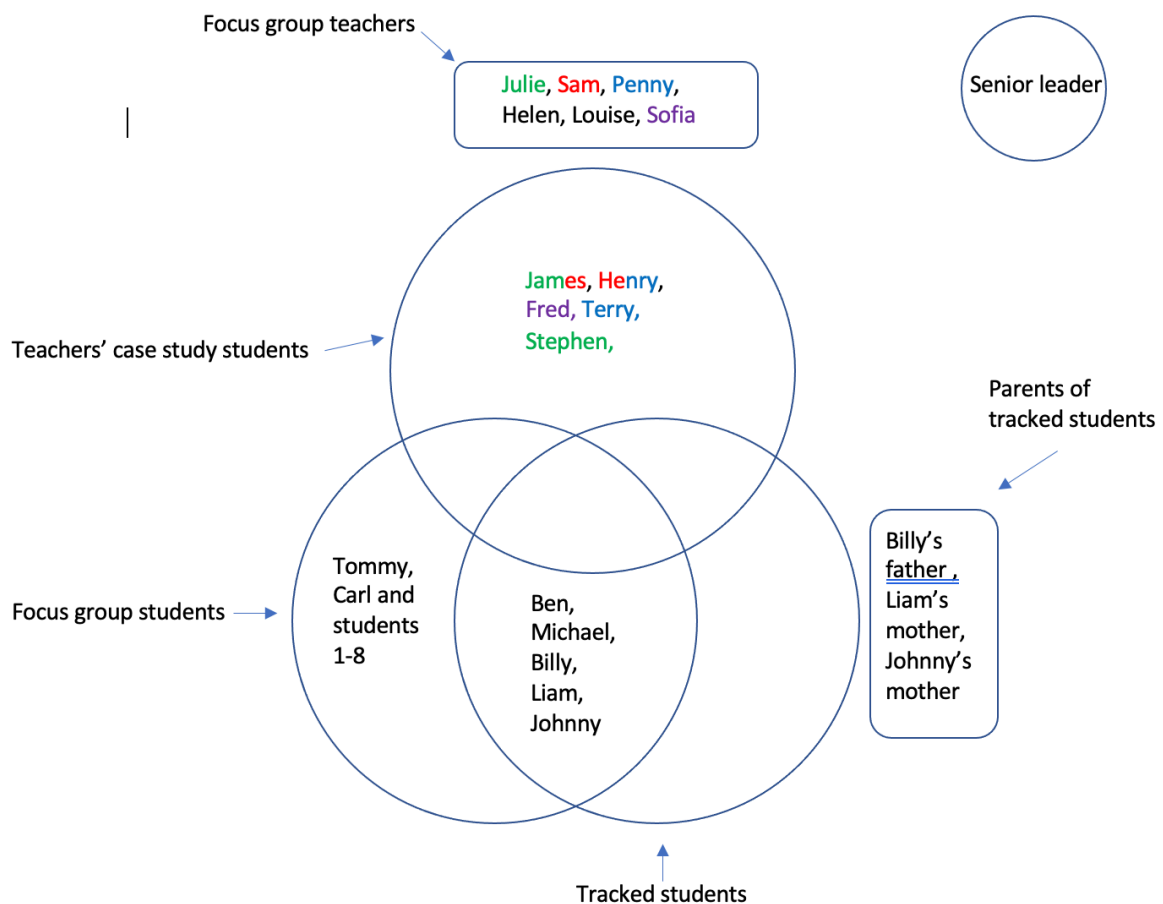
Colour coding is used to show which case study student was chosen by each focus group teacher. The teacher in black font withdrew from the project and so did not feedback on a case study student.



School B is a high achieving boys' school which has experienced difficult times in the past but is currently well regarded and has no difficulty filling its places. Again, there are significant gaps between the progress and attainment of White UK FSM and non-FSM students. The school sees White British FSM students as an area of concern, particularly those who enter the school with high KS2 scores but do not make as much progress as other groups from KS2 to KS4. Both School A and B are led by headteachers who are clear about their aim to secure high academic results and run an orderly organisation. At School B there is a heavy focus on discipline and a comprehensive behaviour management system which is used regularly and consistently by staff.

Participants in School B

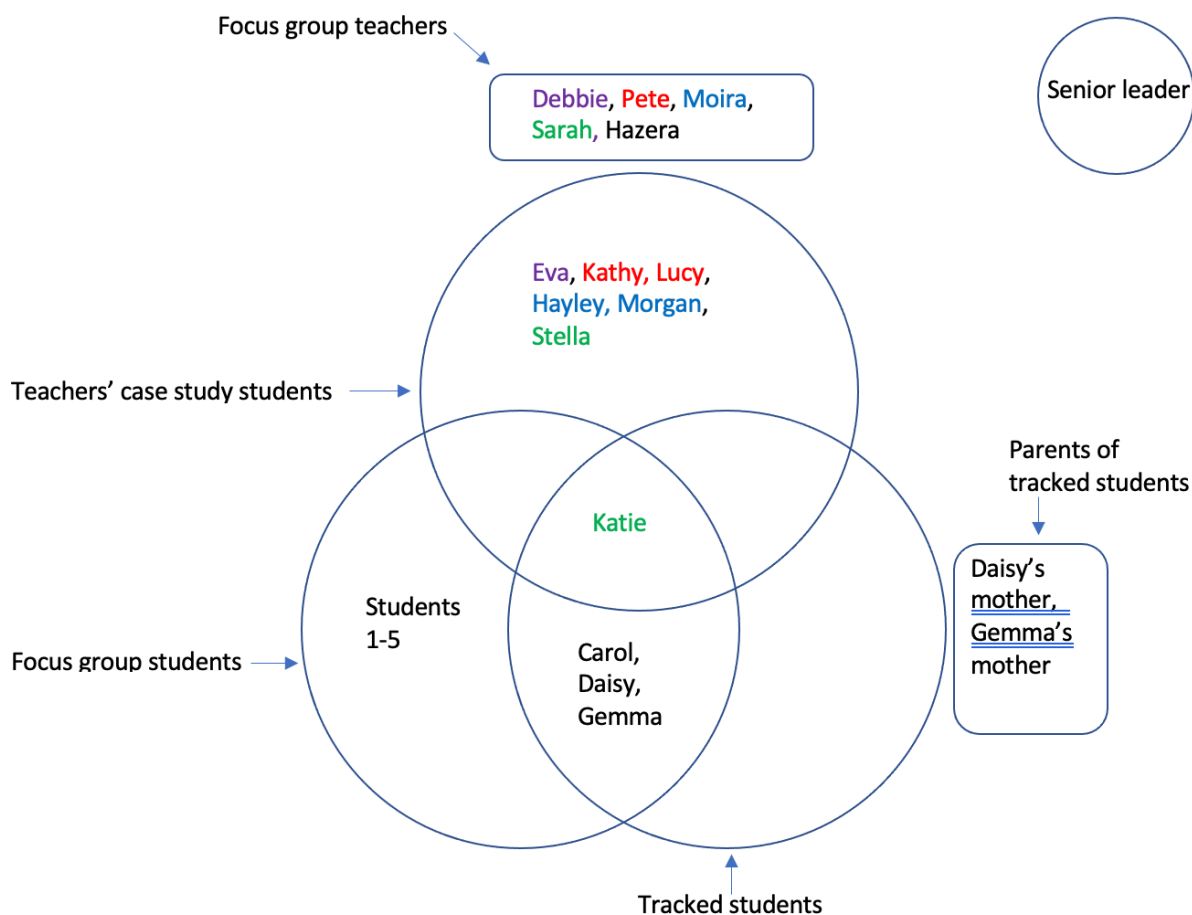
Colour coding is used to show which case study student was chosen by each focus group teacher. Students in two colours were chosen by the two teachers corresponding to those colours. Teachers in black font withdrew from the project and so did not report back on a case study student.



School C is a heavily oversubscribed, high achieving girls' school with a diverse intake. The school perceives White British FSM students to be a particularly pressing area of concern given that the proportion of students from this demographic seems to be increasing. Leadership in School C is distributed and democratic and there is an emphasis on student voice and empowerment. The school has invested in pastoral staff and structures and developed support programmes (such as managing anger or anxiety) in response to students' needs.

Participants in School C

Colour coding is used to show which case study student was chosen by each focus group teacher. The teacher in black font withdrew from the project and did not feedback on a case study student.



Reflections on fieldwork

The fieldwork was characterised by much reflection and interrogation of thoughts and observations. I have selected three experiences to detail here because they illustrate complexity in dealing with a member of staff, a tracked student and an incident with a student who was not part of the study. As such they provide a flavour of the ethical and reflexive challenges I faced and my response to them.

The first concerns an interaction with the link member of SLT at School A near the start of the fieldwork there. The leadership at School A like to have tight control over the organisation. The way that they deal with both staff and students is often characterised by the assertion of power: people are left waiting, reprimanded and checked. I experienced this first-hand in the way that the link SLT person insisted that I wait in reception for him every morning of the fieldwork, even when I had a timetable, knew where to go and would be left unsupervised in the school throughout the day. It was a symbolic act of controlling access and contrasted with Schools B and C, where I was allowed to sign in and begin my day without personal admittance.

His need for control was also highlighted at the end of a student focus group when I had to leave to get to an appointment in another school and he was late to return to the room. I knew I could not leave a group of year 7 students unattended, so made an arrangement with a member of staff on hand to supervise them until the bell went. On my next visit to the school, I was taken aside by the member of SLT and roundly told off for disobeying his command to wait for his return. I felt reprimanded like a child, or like the '*naughty parents*' he once referred to. My emotions of anger and resentment prompted me to wonder if his assertions of power stimulated similar feelings in students, parents and indeed in members of staff who displeased him. Thereafter I had to balance the insight I had gained with the need to observe without bias.

The second concerns my interaction with a tracked student in School A. As will become apparent in the analysis chapters, this student suffered from mental health

issues. On one of the tracked days, I observed the start of a PSHE lesson on suicide. The teacher did not know the class well or that the student had attempted suicide in the previous year. The student I was tracking left in tears. In the absence of anyone able to offer support, I sat with her in an empty classroom and let her talk, during which time she told me about the suicide attempt. It transpired that she was also grappling with a decision about whether to leave the school. I was therefore in a difficult position: as a researcher my intention was to observe rather than participate in her day but as a professional and an adult I was called upon to support and advise, and troubled by her plight. I remained as neutral as possible (despite having an opinion about the school she was intending to transfer to), informed the link SLT of the situation and listened as she worked through her thoughts and feelings. At the end of the second tracked day, she asked if she was ever going to see me again. It was difficult to gently reiterate closure at the same time as validate the trust she had shown in me. This illustrates the emotional challenges the research involved as I navigated a balance between developing relationships and creating a meaningful space for participants, and maintaining boundaries.

The third concerns an incident in a year 7 RE lesson in School B with a teacher who I saw as overbearing. The lesson was about prejudice and discrimination. The student I was tracking had demonstrated an antipathy to the teacher and lesson and had already muttered '*me*' under his breath when the teacher asked the class for examples of prejudice. A black boy began to give a fluent summary of colonialism in Africa. However, the teacher cut him off and told him that colonialism is covered in the year 8 curriculum. A clip followed about Apartheid in South Africa and the same black boy put up his hand and waited patiently for a long time before being chosen. Again, he was allowed to say only a couple of sentences and was cut off, despite clearly having a lot of knowledge.

It was extremely uncomfortable to witness this disjunct between curriculum content and pedagogy; the silencing of a black child who had powerful knowledge about his own cultural heritage but was disregarded, despite the putative topic of the lesson. As a researcher I could not talk about this lesson to anyone but as a consultant concerned with the promotion of equality, it felt wrong not to alert someone to the way that this young black man had been treated. I said nothing at the time but have

used it as an anonymous example in conversations about equality several times since.

These three examples are bound up in a methodological difficulty I faced both during the fieldwork and in the process of analysis: my preconceptions of the three schools, influenced by years of working in the borough and by the relationship I (and the local authority) have had with each. School C has had a good relationship with the local authority for years; it is open and receptive and has values which are congruent with my own view of education. There are other schools with which the local authority has a good relationship which are not regarded as exemplary, so the relationship alone does not account for a favourable opinion. However, it does invite understanding. School A and B have both been more guarded and defensive even though there have at times been strong relationships and valuable shared endeavours. I found the controlling nature of senior leaders at Schools A and B off-putting and some of the approaches to pedagogy and discipline at School B I also found problematic (though these were discovered through observation rather than in advance).

I therefore strove to be aware of potential bias and often challenged myself with an opposing interpretation. I took care to counterbalance preconceptions by looking for fault in what I was disposed to favour and finding things to admire in places I tended to criticise. My analysis attempts to truthfully uncover practices I observed to be helpful and unhelpful, regardless of my relationship to the school. To do this required a process of constant reflexivity, which is the topic of the final section of this chapter.

Reflexivity

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu makes a withering comment about attempts to convey the 'lived experience' of others as being 'most often merely a thinly disguised projection of the researcher's 'lived experience' (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p.94) (even though his later work *The Weight of the World* (1999) seems to constitute just such insights into 'lived experience'). The tool of reflexivity provides a way of trying to separate out what belongs to the researcher and what to the research subject.

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) Bourdieu complicates the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity and signals a break with previous anthropological studies which suggest that the researcher has an objective view on what they observe. Subsequently, he advocates engaging in a process of *'participant objectivation'* (Bourdieu, 2000 cited in Grenfell 2008, p.196) whereby the position of the researcher is itself interrogated to better understand the subjectivities we bring to any interpretation. The meaning of the term *'reflexivity'* developed complexity over Bourdieu's lifetime but retained the sense of a practice in which the social scientist surfaces and acknowledges the influence of their own habitus and field position.

To uncover the unseen assumptions of doxa the social scientist must *'be critically reflexive so as to unveil the unthought categories of thought, which predetermine and delimitate what is thinkable'* (Deer cited in Grenfell, 2008 p.200). During my field work I was therefore engaged in a constant process of questioning my thinking and posing radical alternatives to the structures and processes I observed in an attempt to tease out what was arbitrary, biased or emotive. Bourdieu articulates the importance of this process of examination:

'the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce.' (Bourdieu, 1999 p.608)

I will therefore briefly outline my own *'objective position within the intellectual and academic field'* (Deer cited in Grenfell, 2008 p.197) and some aspects of my habitus which are likely to have had a bearing on my research. I have already given a few examples of how these played out during the field work to illustrate how I engaged with the reflexive process.

Before doing my PGCE in 1999 I spent one and a half years teaching in the private sector and six months teaching abroad. I then worked as a qualified secondary English teacher in state schools in London for nine years. For the last 13 years I have worked as an educational consultant in the borough where I did my field work.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I also grew up in this borough, where I attended a local state primary school, and was looked after by a white working-class childminder.

I therefore have significant links to the field of education, to the locale, and to the white working-class community within it, all of which have a bearing on my relationship with my research subject. I am sympathetic to Ball's interpretation of the current state of the British education system (Ball 2008, 2018) and to others who critique the changes brought about by the neoliberal state. I am concerned by the pressures on students and teachers caused by a performative culture and feel that I have witnessed a decline in wellbeing and in the value accorded to the social and emotional aspects of learning since I joined the teaching profession in 1997.

Ironically, I could be categorised as an 'early adopter' of the standards agenda embodied by the National Strategies because I was at the start of my career and therefore saw such educational initiatives as a natural part of the field. When I moved into consultancy in 2009 it was as a National Strategy Consultant and I could therefore be said to have benefitted from the new field positions which had opened up. However, the arrival of the coalition government and appointment of Michael Gove as education secretary from 2010 signalled a different direction of field change, one which has had implications for schools and for local authorities, whose power and position has been gradually diminished.

I am enormously supportive of and sympathetic to teachers and leaders; they have an incredibly difficult job and have had to navigate a series of field changes which have pushed them into corners which are uncomfortable and sometimes at odds with their own principles. At the same time my distance from the job and the comparative lens afforded by my consultancy role enables me to see that it may be possible (though difficult) to mediate policies in a different way. The research process has helped me to perceive the doxa which govern the system more clearly and the gaps which exist between an institution's intention and the felt experience of the students.

Whilst my habitus is solidly middle class, the time I spent as a child in a white working-class family's home has, in my view, given me an understanding of and respect for people from this habitus and an unconscious tendency to modify my accent to reflect those I am speaking with. As well as helping to create rapport with

students and their families who participated in my research, my experiences have made me sensitive to the pejorative discourses which can surround this socio-ethnic group. Although I perceive the dysfunction and multigenerational disadvantage which affects many families and individuals, I also know first-hand of the reliability, work ethic, kindness, reciprocity, and trustworthiness of many others. The group is heterogenous like any other. Yet there are also commonalities in some of the experiences they have faced through history.

As a teacher I found myself drawn to students from this group and, where there were problems, often had success in re-engaging them in education. At the same time, I experienced frustrations like other teachers. I therefore feel both a bond with and a separateness from people in this socio-ethnic group which I believe helps me to listen, empathise and perceive from several points of view: those of white working-class students and parents; their teachers; and the pejorative discourse of the public eye. During the field work I drew on these various viewpoints to think about and interpret the behaviours and words of students, parents and teachers.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained the qualitative methods I used to investigate my research questions and how I used thematic analysis to make sense of the data produced. I have explained how I disseminated my findings to the schools and borough and how these reports both informed and were separate from the process of academic writing. I have outlined some of the ethical considerations, including how I attempted to provide a safe space for students, teachers and parents and kept separate my role as consultant and researcher. I shared the details of three fieldwork experiences to illustrate how I navigated ethical challenges and engaged reflexively with the process. In this section I also discussed the methodological difficulty of having a prior relationship with the three schools and how I mitigated against any associated bias. This led to the final section in which I invoked Bourdieu's work on reflexivity to draw attention to the importance of being consciously aware of my position within the field. I therefore ended the chapter by sharing details of my career and upbringing which have a bearing on my research and influenced the lens through which I heard and observed and made sense of my findings.

The research tools I employed successfully produced a quantity of rich data which provided insights into the factors affecting engagement and achievement for white working-class students. In this respect, the methodology was a success. In the process, I believe it treated the participants with respect and integrity and provided them with a beneficial space to explore and articulate their thoughts and experiences. However, a key and regrettable limitation is the absence of opportunity to share and engage in dialogue about the findings with the participants. This limitation was a result of the pandemic and could not have been foreseen. Although I have since been able to talk with some teacher participants, I feel uncomfortable that the very subjects of the research have not had the opportunity to respond to the conclusions I have drawn, particularly given that the project explores processes of marginalisation and disempowerment. I can only hope that the experiences of the individuals which are presented and analysed in the following chapters stay with and resonate with readers in a way which provides some compensation for this lack.

Chapter 5: School Ethos

Introduction

Overall, my research findings illustrate that white working-class students feel alienated by a narrow school ethos which privileges academic achievement above all else. In contrast, when the school embodies a broad and inclusive ethos, they tend to feel a greater sense of belonging. In this chapter I set out some examples, drawn from all three research schools, of how school ethos can work to alienate pupils and also how it can support a sense of belonging.

The title of this chapter references language used in schools, but the analysis also uses related theoretical concepts to provide a coherent framework which works across chapters and links to wider academic literature. School ethos is used by schools to convey the conscious selection of a set of values which are intended to guide practices and behaviours, even if there is sometimes a gap between the official and felt ethos (see detail below). It can be regarded as synonymous with, but subtly different from, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and more specifically to what some academics refer to as institutional habitus (Stahl, 2013): the unspoken assumptions and values of an organisation. I use school ethos to convey the sense of a school's intentions and to explore the gap between intention and felt experience. However, I use institutional habitus when referring to unspoken assumptions and the effects of dissonance between institutional habitus and students' home habitus.

As explained in Chapter 3, Bourdieu's concept of doxa can be regarded as a further synonym which invokes the effect of wider educational and societal discourses on school practices. I use the notion of doxa to discuss how my research findings show that the privileging of academic attainment, side-lining of the social and emotional aspects of learning and devaluing of working-class culture have become normalised through the structures of school systems and are therefore largely unseen. I argue that this is enacted through symbolic violence as dominant values and cultural practices are imposed as legitimate without recognition of their fundamentally arbitrary nature. Doxa function across the field of education whilst institutional

habitus is specific to one setting. School ethos is akin to institutional habitus but includes the conscious selection of values as well as the imprint of those which are unconscious on the atmosphere of a place. It thus facilitates exploration of the mismatch between official and felt ethos in a way which is not possible through the concept of institutional habitus. The nuances of all three synonyms are therefore useful in my analysis of how white working-class students experience school.

A final note on terms: academic attainment is a form of institutional capital. I refer to academic attainment in contexts where I need this specificity and institutional capital when making a broader point about power.

In the literature review I cited Alder's definition of school ethos as a '*pervasive atmosphere*' which is created by '*behaviour, primarily in the realm of social interaction*' and '*recognised initially on an experiential rather than a cognitive level*' (Alder, 1993, p.69). I use school ethos in this way to explore the relational and experiential aspects of white working-class marginalisation within a system shaped by particular doxa. To do this I detail the discrepancies which can exist between official ethos and students' felt experience (Eisner, 1994; Donnelly, 2000) and the way that such dissonance can be exacerbated for some groups of students, such as the white working-class. I use Donnelly's three dimensions model to conceptualise the interplay between a school's '*aspirational ethos*' (as articulated by school authorities and published in documents), the '*ethos of outward attachment*' (how it manifests in the behaviour of individuals, the physical environment and organisational structures) and the '*ethos of inward attachment*' (individuals' thoughts, feelings and perceptions) (Donnelly, 2000, p.151). The lens of Graham's (2012) work on the differential experience of sub-groups within a school community provides further nuance to Donnelly's model. I also draw on the work of Bragg and Manchester (2011, 2017) to suggest the notion of a continuum in the way that ethos operates in schools: at one end it can be used as an instrument of control and at the other as a mechanism to liberate and prefigure alternatives.

The three research schools can be seen as occupying different places on the continuum of how school ethos operates, with a correlational effect on student engagement. At one end is School A, which uses school ethos as an instrument of

control to maintain a rigorous focus on academic achievement and high standards of behaviour and seeks to 'rescue' students who do not conform to its vision for them. At the other end is School C which is much closer to the 'considerate, convivial and capacious' ethos which Bragg and Manchester perceive as enabling schools to *'prefigure alternative, more socially just worlds'* (2017, 2). In the middle is School B which is preoccupied by control but takes more of an avuncular stance to its working-class students and thus keeps them broadly 'on board' although not particularly engaged with schooling.

I start by discussing the privileging of academic attainment in society as a whole and its stark manifestation in School A. I go on to explore how this, together with the pathologisation of working-class culture in School A, creates a dissonance between institutional and home habitus which alienates white working-class students and their families and undermines their sense of agency in the field of school. I conclude this section with an illustrative case study.

In the second section I focus on School C; what an inclusive school ethos looks and feels like and the effect on students and families. I show how the school's openness to influence from its student body - to being structured by the habitus students bring with them from home - creates a greater sense of student agency and reduces dissonance between institutional and home habitus.

In the final section I explore the position of School B on the continuum and the way in which its ethos supports but does not inspire its white working-class community. Here, the mismatch between home and institutional habitus coupled with a lack of attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning make it difficult for white working-class students to navigate the field of school.

Ethos as control: School A

The privileging of academic attainment

Successive governments have argued that every child should have access to academically rigorous qualifications and have seen the removal or devaluing of vocational qualifications and non-academic subjects as a way to ensure this happens. This aim is laudable, but the means are debatable. Clearly it is important that there are mechanisms in place to prevent working-class students being siphoned into vocational routes when they wish to pursue an academic pathway. However, if both had equal value in eyes of society all students, not just the working-class, would be able to choose the best pathway for them rather than be swept along by doxa which operate at both school and national level.

School A has responded to governmental pressures and the (now ex) headteacher's vision by placing an emphasis on academic success in a way which reduces other aspects of school life and contributes to the marginalisation of some students. This narrow academic focus was discussed in staff focus groups. One member of staff stated:

"In terms of how the curriculum is organised [in England] it's become very academic, which is great, if you're conscientious or hard working or even if you are into academia but if you're not into academia... where does that leave you? And I think we really struggle in this school with that minority of students who don't buy into the academic. And what are we doing as a school and as a society to support that and to give them alternative options?" (Steph, staff, school A)

This teacher placed the school within the wider educational landscape in which academic achievement is privileged and there is ever increasing pressure on schools to meet performance standards. She identified a problem for *'that minority of students who don't buy into the academic'* and questioned both the school and wider societal approach. This view was echoed by a parent in School B who pointed out that *'not every child is academic'* and is in favour of the school providing a broader curriculum.

The same teacher from School A drew attention to the lack of value given to interpersonal skills and hinted at the frustration of always having to justify activities in relation to academic achievement.

“I personally I don’t think that we celebrate non-academic achievement enough. Where are we celebrating that you’ve done something kind? Where are we allowed to take them off for the day and visit an art museum that doesn’t directly link into getting a high grade in the curriculum?” (Steph, staff, school A)

Another teacher spoke wistfully of an alternative value system, driven by national metrics and ultimately experienced on a felt level by students. The way she envisaged that this ‘*would filter down*’ alludes to the impact of policy on individual lives. She suggests that such a change would benefit her case study student, Molly:

“if we could be measuring schools on how safe and how happy and how emotionally successful students are then perhaps that would filter down and would change the culture for the students as well. Like Molly is really good at singing, really good at music, really kind, really looks after her friends, really stands up for people. If we could be in a place where those things are celebrated on a par” (Annie, staff, School A)

Here, the list of Molly’s qualities is also a list of what is seen as inferior to academic achievement: the implication is that they are *not* currently ‘*celebrated on a par*’.

I argue that such narrow focus on academic achievement can work to privilege middle-class norms and undermine working-class lives. This is evident in the following quotation in which a member of staff talks at length about a pivotal incident involving a white working-class girl, her parent and the school.

Rosie: By year 11 her relationship with the school had collapsed and the parental relationship with the school had collapsed and just before that collapse completely took place, and I think this student ended up doing just English and maths, so the entire broad curriculum was withdrawn for her

because she wouldn't conform, she couldn't conform to what we needed her to do. But I remember it was an open evening for the sixth form and she, this parent, was sitting upstairs in the talk from the school leadership about what we need to get the girls to do, how to be educationally successful, how to be successful in life. And this mum sat there going 'So I suppose they think I'm like a failure'

Interviewer: You heard her say that?

Rosie: Yeah. And she felt like, what we were saying looked like a good life, wasn't her good life. And shortly afterwards the entire relationship with the school collapsed.

(staff interview, school A)

This quotation draws attention to the clash between home and institutional habitus and an imbalance between structure and agency; instead of a two-way process, the school expects that students are structured by the institutional habitus in a way which reduces their agency and negates the value of difference. It is saturated with the language of power. The school is pitted against the student in the way that it takes away the opportunity to study a broad curriculum as punishment for her failure to conform, though frames it as an action *'for'* her. The shift from *'wouldn't conform'* to *'couldn't conform'* undermines even the student's power to rebel; instead of being an agent of resistance she is cast as deficient. The way in which the address to parents is framed emphasises the school as a coercive force, getting students to do things in a particular way because of its own needs. The idea of success is doxic; it is presented as common sense and monolithic, with the school as the bearer of knowledge. The mother's comment is a reasonable inference and articulates clearly the message received by students who don't *'conform'*. The clash in habitus is apparent in the teacher's paraphrase about what a *'good life'* looks like and is linked directly to the *'collapse'* of the relationship between the family and school.

This is not an isolated case: observation and interview data suggest that the relationships between white working-class students, their families and this school often deteriorate as the girls move from year 7 to year 11. The narrow focus on academic attainment and related reification of middle-class habitus works to alienate

white working-class families who feel that their values and aspirations are not only incompatible with the school, but regarded as inferior.

How values are conveyed

What is valued in a school can be conveyed in various ways, from the language used to talk about success and what is celebrated, to curriculum and decisions about resources. These reflect and sustain an institutional habitus which is felt, but not seen as constructed. For example, how the school tries to influence subject choice reveals how academic subjects have greater institutional capital. Here, a year 10 student talks about how she came to take GCSE sociology:

“We changed to sociology to give us a taster of what it would be like in year 10 and I quite enjoyed it and they tried to get me to change it for history, but I said no because I didn’t want to do history but I’m glad I picked it because it’s one of my best subjects” (Mandy, school A)

History is part of the Ebacc (a measure of schools’ performance) but sociology is not. Here we can see the school putting pressure on a student to take a more ‘academic’ subject which has greater value for the school. The student was confident enough to hold onto her preference, but others may be more easily swayed. The interaction is a micro-moment which conveys the differential value of subjects and may leave the student feeling her choice is for something ‘lesser’.

A year 7 student talked about how she would like to do more art: in school A, year 7 only do art for one term of the year.

“I really want to do art, but I haven’t done it yet and I’m only going to do it for a term” (Heather, student, school A)

The minimal space this subject is given in the year 7 curriculum suggests that it does not hold sufficient value in the school to be given the status of a full subject. This is supported by a comment made by a member of staff about a different year 10 girl

who was withdrawn from art GCSE because of being behind in maths and English, which are both benchmark subjects:

“OK you’re behind in your English and maths so we’re going to punish you by taking you off art, which you love, and giving you more English and maths. Now, I’m saying the word ‘punish’ quite consciously here because if you’re a 14-year-old who is not particularly academic and art is your sanctuary every week, why am I being taken off art and being given more of a subject I hate?”
(Steph, staff, school A)

The use of perspective and shifting pronoun conveys how such school decisions are experienced by students: as a form of symbolic violence, a punishment which, together with the removal of a ‘sanctuary’, could prompt a student to disengage from school and feel it is not working in her best interests.

Allocation of economic capital demonstrates further how academic attainment is prioritised at School A (and also at School B). Teachers at these schools talked about the way in which more resources are put into KS4 than KS3. This is a product of short-term thinking focused on exam results, and educational triage (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000) in the context of a system stretched to breaking point by lack of governmental investment: schools allocate resources based on urgency, as happens in a medical setting, rather than longer term ‘health’. Again, it conveys to students that exam results are the most important product of schooling. Teachers see the irony that inferior educational experiences at KS3 mean disengagement for students and more work for teachers in KS4, but the pressure on schools to avert performance disaster at GCSE is too great for them to redistribute what are already insufficient resources.

“we’ve missed a trick, we should be putting our strongest teachers in with year 8 and 9, not giving them the weaker teachers. And actually, if we put more focus in KS3 maybe we wouldn’t have to work so hard at KS4, because we’re basically making up for 3 years” (Steph, staff, School A)

Another teacher at School A talked about how *“the younger year groups are definitely disadvantaged because we’re so focused on KS4”* (Shahina, staff, School A). However, the doxa perpetuate these practices by making such decisions seem common sense.

Power and Control

The headteacher and senior leadership team determine the official ethos and control its implementation, through decisions such as those detailed above. In School A, control is an important aspect of the headteacher and SLT’s style. One morning whilst waiting in reception, I was perplexed by the sight of the headteacher prompting girls arriving at school to display their hands for inspection. It seemed to be a daily routine with compliance achieved by a slight finger wagging gesture from staff. The students were being checked for nail polish. A couple were caught, pulled to the side and given the means to remove it. This policing of the body (most often through uniform and hairstyle) can be seen as a form of symbolic violence and is a classic way that schools assert power over pupils. Here it is taken to an extreme: not only are nail polish and any form of make-up forbidden but hair bands must be grey and are not allowed to be stored on wrists.

As a researcher at the school, I too experienced some of these aspects of control. I was always kept waiting by the link member of SLT, who required me to be let into the school by him each morning, though there was no real need and he quickly disappeared. Students were also kept waiting. I was with him on one occasion when a girl was told to wait in a classroom after school for 15 minutes whilst he showed me out and then did his gate duty, which would certainly take more than 15 minutes.

Whilst waiting in reception one morning, I talked briefly to a white working-class year 10 girl who was waiting for her mum to come out of a meeting with a member of SLT. The girl told me she had first been excluded in year 8. When the mother emerged, she seemed angry. She was swearing, jabbing at the computer screen to log out and angrily said to her daughter *‘you’ve been chucked out’*, like a piece of rubbish. The student had indeed been excluded from the school for two days. Repeated

experiences of this kind have a lasting impact on how a student and family feels about school as a sense of being judged and alienated becomes manifest in physical exclusion.

Like the institution analysed in the book *Factories for Learning* (Kulz, 2017), assertions of power in School A are framed as upholding a school ethos of discipline and good behaviour. However, as I discuss in the next section, they also reflect a missionary zeal which looks down on working-class ways of life and seeks to impose dominant values on students and families who may not share this cultural logic. On a macro level, the institutional habitus thereby confers power on those who conform and exercises symbolic violence upon those who do not.

The pathologisation of working-class lives and values

As Graham's (2012) work illustrates, different groups may experience the same school in different ways. This is often connected to power, how people are positioned in relation to each other and the congruence between home and institutional habitus. Comments from the headteacher and some teaching staff position the school, in relation to white working-class students, as akin to missionaries in colonial Africa: a saviour which knows best. As one teacher says: *'we make it better for them.'* If students conform to the school's vision for them, they are praised and supported. But if they don't, undesirable aspects are treated as in need of fixing: *'if a child is demonstrating behaviours which suggest they don't want to learn, we need to fix that'* (Rosie, staff, School A). A passing reference from the Deputy Head to *'naughty parents'* suggests that this attitude extends to families.

Part of the 'aspirational ethos' in School A is articulated in its mission statement which emphasises knowledge of the individual. Indeed, three members of staff comment with pride that the school knows its students well: *'we feel that we know our girls really well'* (staff, School A). However, students spoke about the way that appearance and conformity is valued more than individuality and when asked what the school could value more, several students said "us". They also talked about not

feeling heard: *“I’d get the teachers to listen to the students more, and what they think”* (Mandy, student, School A).

A senior leader’s statement provides insight into one of the ways in which knowledge of students is gained: *“The most vulnerable children are being scrutinised on a regular basis”* (staff, School A). For some students it may be that teacher knowledge is gained more through surveillance (‘*scrutinised*’) and dialogue between professionals than through dialogue with the students themselves. This is a different kind of ‘knowledge’ of a student. Although year 7 students said they could go to their Head of Year with problems, by year 10 students were unclear who to turn to. They seemed to rely on trusted subject teachers with whom they had built a relationship rather than a system which provides clear pastoral support for every student. Going to a mentor was mentioned as a last resort, but talked about with suspicion, as if they did not trust confidentiality.

Whilst knowledge of students is part of the official ethos, the way that this happens (surveillance, reliance on independently forged relationships) means that some students may not *feel* known or listened to by the institution as a whole; there is a dissonance between the dimensions of Donnelly’s model (2000). Graham (2012) suggests that student experience and perspective is influenced by which group the student belongs to and its status within the school. In School A, I argue that white working-class lives and culture are pathologized in a way which strips them of value and power and means that girls from this group are often misrecognised - not seen or valued for who they are.

In this school, the first teacher focus group took place in two sittings; three teachers met at the original time and two teachers a few days later. This split allowed insight into contrasting ways of relating to and speaking about white working-class students. The second session was dominated by one teacher (Rosie, who later withdrew from the project) and characterised by a kind of doublespeak. On one hand the teachers spoke compassionately about students, claimed that students were seen and valued as individuals and that the school valued diversity. On the other hand, there was evidence that working-class ways of life were viewed as inferior, that only the parts of students’ identities which fitted with the institutional habitus were welcome and

that the school's focus on academic success blinded them to the social, emotional and psychological dimensions of students' experiences.

This quote starts by appearing to value difference but then contradicts this stance by both insisting that everyone wants the same thing and that people without institutional capital – 'good qualifications' - have inferior lives.

..... all identities are different and so you have to assume that every child who walks through the doors wants the same thing at the end which is a coterie of good qualifications which give them options to a better life, or the same life, but you know erm options, always options. (Rosie, staff, School A)

Whilst it is probably true that most parents want their children to do well at school, I would argue that this is tied up with wanting their child to be happy and thrive in an institution where they spend a large proportion of their time. The value placed on academic qualifications is a social construct; it means different things to different people and does not hold the same importance for everyone. However, this arbitrary quality is misrecognised and instead dominant discourses are legitimated without question. The focus on '*options*' is another example. One student I interviewed intends to be an electrician in the family business and has no interest in having '*options*' to do anything else. The reference to a '*better life*' reveals the teacher's judgement that people without '*good qualifications*' (such as the white working-class mother at the parents' evening above) are inferior. The way Rosie self-corrects ('*or the same life*') suggests that this judgement is a slip which she goes on to further cover up with the acceptable discourse of '*options*'.

As Ball has argued, the English educational system justifies a relentless focus on academic achievement by presenting it as a moral purpose; schools have a moral duty to ensure students achieve in order to open the door to the kinds of success promised by a meritocratic society (Ball, 2008/2013). Schools and teachers can believe that they are working in the students' best interests by taking action to ensure they succeed academically, but be distracted from seeing or valuing the broader person and the way that the imposition of one value system can alienate people who may not share it. It also leads to *inauthentic* respect: students are told

that difference is valued and that they are seen and treated as individuals, but they also receive strong messages that working-class ways of life are seen as inferior, that some subjects have more worth than others and that the school values academic achievement more than their well-being. There is an expectation that working-class students are structured by an institutional habitus which they have no agency to influence. My research suggests that the combination of well-meaning intentions and blindness to potential damage is particularly dangerous and insulting for those on the receiving end.

In this quote Annie (teacher) responds to my question about how white working-class students experience the school, in particular its focus on academic achievement and strict approach to behaviour. She understands that students don't always 'buy into' or share the vision the school has for them and that this makes behaviour systems '*frustrating*'.

the students we're talking about, they don't see that we want the best for you, this is what we want for you at the end, when you leave us this is what we want you to go away with, when they lose sight of that vision I think that their experience of the school is frustrating because, well, why can't I wear a green coat, why do I have to have black shoes on, why do I have to be walking on the right side of the corridor, there's no one else in the corridor at the moment miss. And I can think of, and again, they're white British students, girls that have come into school deliberately wearing a green coat and it's such a small thing but it's deliberately saying I don't care, I'm not following your rule (Annie, staff, School A)

The act of defiance (wearing a green coat) is seen as a rejection of the rules by a student who does not see (or believe) that the school is acting in her best interests. It may also be an assertion of individuality, representative of the parts of herself which are not welcomed by the school - a rebellion against symbolic violence. In the quote below Annie does not see that her initial claim is undermined by insisting that the student conform to the school's vision for her. In truth, the school does not welcome embodied capital associated with a working-class habitus, only capitals which are compatible with the institutional habitus.

Again it goes back to that knowing the students because I acknowledge who you are and your identity and everything you bring to the school when you walk through the door but what I'm trying to teach you is that you need these tools and you need to be able to speak and write and approach things and communicate in these ways to give you as many options as possible. It's not about saying one thing's wrong it's about opening things up for you. I think that when they don't see that, and that's a very hard thing for a child to see and to understand, they do see it as why am I being made to do these things. (Annie, staff, School A)

Annie understands that it is 'a very hard thing for a child to see' but does not realise that the contradictions inherent in her utterance may be part of the reason the student does not feel, on a deep level (Donnelly's third dimension of school ethos) that she can trust the school to act in her best interests. Annie operates within a doxic system. She has absorbed the dominant discourse about education and does not recognise that the requirement to conform to the school's value system may alienate those who feel judged by its standards.

In the following quote from Rosie, she talks about the student whose relationship with the school '*completely collapsed*' after the incident at the parents' event. In line with the dominant discourse, the school '*failed*' the student by allowing her to leave without sufficient academic qualifications. She does not, however, think of the ways that the school '*failed*' the student on emotional, social and psychological levels by withdrawing the '*entire broad curriculum*' or making her family feel like failures.

I don't know how we could have done it differently. We failed that young woman, she didn't leave with what she needed to have a bett- any kind of life. You know, her options are limited and that's not a good thing and I don't know what her future will look like. I hope there's opportunities for her to build up her qualifications, but we did fail that girl (Rosie, staff, School A)

Again, Rosie catches herself making an explicit value judgement about (implicitly) working-class life and falls back on '*options*' as an acceptable discourse. That she

says *'I don't know how we could have done it differently'* supports the sense (that she conveyed at other times) that the school is acting in the only way possible, that it is unquestionably right in its approach, because she does not see that the values which underlie practices are arbitrary. This conversation captures on a micro-level what the school as a whole conveys on a macro-level: an inauthentic respect which comes from the dissonance between saying that difference and individuality are valued but believing and acting in ways that suggest dominant values are superior.

This is in contrast to the way that some other teachers within the school think, speak and act. The teachers in the first focus group perceived and identified problems with the school's narrow academic ethos, talked from the perspective of white working-class families and seemed to have authentic respect for them as individuals and their broader social class. Here Steph talks about the impact of poverty on a student she used to teach:

'mum was depressed and didn't leave her room, dad was working late trying to obviously do the right thing. She would go home, she'd make herself a ready meal, she'd been given a fiver a day by dad to feed herself, and then she used to go to her room and be on snapchat for 7 hours. Well, mum and dad, it's not that they didn't want their child to succeed but actually what chance does that child have?' (Steph, staff, School A)

She draws attention to the father's hard work and both parents' care and sees the reduction in life chances as a product of poverty and wider societal influences rather than from deficit choices or lifestyle. In the quote below, Shahina sympathises with how some parents might experience repeated phone calls from school and how intimidating it might feel to be summoned into school to discuss their child's behaviour:

'we can understand from the parents' perspective, they don't want to hear any more, you know, it can be quite daunting' (Shahina, staff, School A)

Raising aspirations is often presented as a simple process with the fault placed on the student or family for having what are perceived as low aspirations. However here Emily is sensitive to the complexities of the issue:

'moving out of your community comes along with its own issues, you know, my family they don't go to art exhibitions, what happens if I go to an art exhibition how am I going to talk about it at home, will they think it's silly or meaningless.....what if I do A Levels or want to, or get a job here, its' so different to anything else I know or the people I know or am related to do, what will that mean for me? I think there's just so much to think about there'
(Emily, staff, School A)

The use of first person suggests an ability to see from the student's point of view. These are the types of teacher that the year 10 girls told me they go to in times of difficulty. There is greater congruence between what they think, say and do which enables the students to trust that they see and respect them as individuals and are working in their best interests.

It seems that there are individual teachers who have genuinely supportive relationships with white working-class students (a subject I return to in the next chapter), but the institution as a whole does not enable many of these students to feel authentically seen, held and cared for. The tension between the institutional assertion of control and power, and more equal and humane relationships with individual teachers which allow students agency and legitimate their home habitus, is what white working-class students navigate as they travel through the school. Interestingly, some of the more sympathetic teachers also experience clashes with the senior leadership team as they question or resist monolithic decisions or assertions of power.

To summarise, in School A, the 'aspirational ethos' is concerned with the accumulation of institutional capital and high standards of behaviour. In themselves, these are laudable aims intended to produce a calm and purposeful learning environment and to support the engagement and achievement of every student, regardless of their background. This works well for the majority of students and is

why the school is so successful, both in terms of its exam results and reputation. The school also prides itself on knowing every child and on valuing diversity.

The 'ethos of outward attachment' is manifest in the organisational structures, physical environment and behaviour of individuals. Curriculum design, deployment of resources, structure and resourcing of the pastoral system and the language used by teachers and leaders support the aspirational ethos in that there is clear privileging of academic success. However, values which fall outside this central concern are marginalised. Students who are academic, middle class or aspirational, can feel like Bourdieu's 'fish in water'; their vision for and of themselves is congruent with the school's vision. However, for students who deviate, the school can feel judgemental, narrow, unaccommodating, petty, oppressive and unsupportive. For students who experience this 'ethos of inward attachment' it is difficult to feel or believe that the school has their best interests at heart. This understandably has a significant impact on engagement and achievement.

Case study from School A

Leanne is a year 7 girl at School A. She is enthusiastic and engaged with her learning in most subjects although tends to demand a lot of teacher attention; she puts up her hand a lot and seems to need reassurance as well as support to get going with independent tasks. In the spring term, she was positive about her learning and the school, particularly in the focus group interview, to which she was keen to contribute.

Leanne lives with her mother and older sister, who is also at the school (in year 9). Her older sister joined in year 8, was enthusiastic at first but quickly got into trouble for behaviour and has had at least one fixed term exclusion. In the one-to-one interview, Leanne says that her mother is supportive of her education, although the shadow of exclusion is already within Leanne's discourse about school.

'my mum's a single mum and she really wants us to do good in life.... she tells me and [my sister] don't muck about with anyone and to just get on with our work especially now we're in secondary, cos we can just get excluded'

Leanne speaks more than once about liking history and geography and relates it to her family's interest and expertise in these subjects:

'geography and history I learn a bit quick because my mum really likes history and my family really likes geography so they're always testing me.....so I learn that quickly and then I go home and tell my family about it'

My observations suggest that in these lessons she is engaged; she asks lots of questions and seems to retain information well. Although she had not done her homework for geography, once she was paired with a student who had, she got on with the written task effectively. Writing does not seem to be difficult for her, although she has a tendency to take a functional approach to tasks; she likes getting them done fairly quickly and is not keen to re-read and edit or add detail.

English is another favourite subject. She likes reading and tells me proudly that she has a reading age of 16. Her English teacher is Steph, one of the teachers in the staff focus group. She has chosen Leanne as her case study student. Steph is a warm and experienced teacher who manages Leanne well: they have agreed a strategy to help Leanne be more resourceful and she skilfully gives her attention, praise and support without affecting the flow of the lesson.

Steph says that Leanne's mother's attitude to the school is inconsistent – *'you never know which one you're going to get'*. In the second focus group session Steph reports that Leanne's mother did not turn up for parents' evening which was a shame, as at that point there were a lot of positive things to say about Leanne's engagement and progress. Since then, Leanne seems to have *'gone off the boil'*; she is less engaged, gives up or says she doesn't know very easily and has become embroiled in peer conflict.

The institutional habitus in which academic achievement is privileged and there are high standards of behaviour supports Leanne well in many ways. In lessons where teaching and learning is strong, she is engaged, and the good behaviour of other students keeps her on track. There are times in these lessons where she looks round for distraction but, finding none, gets on with her work again. In lessons where the teaching is less engaging, she is often off task; although her behaviour is not disruptive, she gets away with doing no work at all, or very little. She is therefore likely to do better in this school, where teaching, learning and behaviour management tend to be strong, than in a school where they are weak.

However, the school does not seem to be dealing effectively with Leanne's older sister and when Leanne shows signs of *'going off the boil'* her teacher Steph fears she may follow her sister's trajectory. When Leanne conforms to the school's image of a successful student, she is able to flourish, at least in lessons with strong teachers. However, the narrow sense of what is valued and what it means to be successful, hastens her disengagement when things start to go wrong.

The relationship between home and school is critical in this situation. Leanne's sister's behaviour has already tested the relationship between their mother and the school. If the mother does not feel supported, respected or able to trust the school, it will be difficult for school and home to work together to support Leanne effectively. The existing difficulties in this relationship may be why the mother did not come to Leanne's parents' evening and is inconsistent in her responses to the school. Steph reports that within a meeting (about the older sister) the mother quickly switched from telling her daughter to *'listen to the teacher'* to referring to the said teacher in derogatory terms.

It seems that the school does not handle relationships with white working-class parents in such a way as to build trust and enable them to work effectively together. Instead, the habitus operates to marginalise and pathologize those who do not conform. This weakness is likely to stymie Leanne's engagement and progress even though the academic rigour and high behaviour for learning have the capacity to support her.

What an inclusive ethos looks and feels like: School C

Most schools claim to have an inclusive ethos. However, there are significant differences in the degree to which students feel that this aligns with their experience. Like School A, School C is a high achieving girls' school. However here, the greater congruence between the aspirational ethos and students' felt experience means that even students who don't conform to dominant educational values, have a strong sense of belonging. A senior member of staff articulates the school ethos in this quote:

'It's about letting young women become themselves and be the best version of themselves' (staff, School C)

The emphasis is on individuality and fulfilling potential rather than conforming to a particular vision of success. In this school, there is a sense that pupils' perspectives are valued and that systems seek to increase their sense of agency: there is a balance between the way they are structured by, and how they structure, the institutional habitus. Debbie gives the first staff focus group response to my question about what the school values: *'the girls' perspective on issues'* (Debbie, staff, School C). She goes on to talk about restorative approaches to behaviour issues:

'[we] allow them a way out by having conversations with them rather than straight away giving them punishments.....the girls are given a lot of freedom to rectify mistakes' (Debbie, staff, School C)

Pete is the next to speak. The statement *'the school obviously values academic success'* is one phrase in a long utterance which covers restorative approaches, *'diversity of experience'* and mentions *'fantastic arts involvement both performance and visual'* and support for the Duke of Edinburgh award.

Moira's response echoes Pete's reference to diversity and suggests that even students who do not fit a societal system that privileges academic attainment are supported and valued:

'not just supporting the academically motivated. Less able girls I think are quite well supported. So you're valuing all kinds of different experiences'
(Moira, staff, School C)

Sarah used to have a different role which enabled her to see the school in relation to others nearby. She draws on this perspective in this quote:

'the sense of the empowerment of all the girls.....making them strong, independent, opinionated, able to cope in the world and be respectful. I got a sense of that ethos that I didn't necessarily see in other schools. Just that sense of worth and pride in being female. Being a strong young woman. Having their own individuality and being listened to.' (Sarah, staff, School C)

The importance of women is echoed by the year 10 focus group girls whose first, emphatic response to a question about what the school values is *'women'*. They also say: *'respecting everyone'*, *'community'* *'respect each other and our environment'* and that *'they want us to do well'*. There is good-humoured discussion about the last statement, about how *'they're always saying that'* and whilst Gemma says *'I feel like they don't give us a break'*, Daisy responds *'but then I do think that's because they care'*. There is a strong sense that teachers and students are on the same side. Even a teacher who was *'really stressed'* about the exams, perhaps because of her own reputation, was also *'really supportive'* (Daisy, student, School C).

There is significant congruence between what staff and students say about the school. Behaviours and practices (part of Donnelly's second dimension) also contribute to a coherent picture in which students' perspectives are valued and they are seen as active and equal members of the community who contribute to shaping the institutional habitus. For example, in several subjects, students complete regular surveys and take part in focus groups to find out what they enjoyed or found helpful about particular units and how provision could be improved.

Pupil progress reviews involve conversations directly with students. Where engagement or progress is not as good as expected, they are asked *'what are you going to do about it?'* and supported to take action: *'enabling them to take control and be responsible'* (staff, School C). Developing a growth mindset in which effort is valued, mistakes and feedback are seen as part of the learning process and students support each other, is an overt part of school wide discourse. Well-being has high importance; pastoral managers are employed expressly to support students and are visible and well regarded by pupils, parents and staff. Care for well-being is, like mindset, part of school-wide discourse.

Comments made by KS3 students also suggest that there is a high level of congruence between the three dimensions of Donnelly's model.

'If you put in 100% you'll get 100% if you put 50% you'll get 50% if you put 1% you'll get 1%' (Katie, student, School C)

Here the student has absorbed messages about effort and its correlation with achievement. This student (who will be discussed later) struggles with concentration, has a learner identity made fragile by experience and a very difficult home context but feels supported by a lot of teachers and in particular by her tutor and pastoral leader who she talks to on a daily basis. The quote below is from her friend during the same focus group conversation.

'They say if you're happy you're going to learn more and if you're grumpy you're not going to learn a thing' (Carol, student, School C)

The way she paraphrases messages about well-being suggests she has absorbed the sense that the school cares about her well-being because it is seen as integral to learning. This is much closer to being a *'convivial, considerate, capacious'* school, in which there is a balance between structure and agency, than one which uses school ethos as an instrument of control.

At break and lunchtimes students can be found in chatting in groups, unsupervised, in various parts of the school. There are ledges or windowsills in corridors, and benches dotted around outside where girls gather. Whilst there are members of staff on duty, they are often engaged in conversation with the students, or each other, rather than 'patrolling'. This contributes to an atmosphere of trust in which students are allowed to be themselves and there are not such sharp divisions between home and institutional habitus.

School C is not perfect: some white-working class students underachieve, a small minority end up leaving the school to take up places in alternative provision or the pupil referral unit, parents shout at members of staff, and in some year groups there are significant problems with peer relationships. However, the students interviewed tended to talk positively about the school and displayed a strong sense of belonging in what they said and did. The institutional habitus in this school give rise to practices and discourses which are more conducive to genuine inclusion.

Getting by: School B

'This school is a good school, but I just don't like school in general' (Ben, student, School B)

School B is a high achieving boys' school, about a mile from School C. There is a traditional quality to its institutional habitus in that there is a firm focus on academic achievement and orderly behaviour (with thorough systems to track and manage both) and instructional teaching methods. It is positioned further towards School A on the continuum of how school ethos operates, in that there is a strong emphasis on control and order. However, it takes an avuncular, rather than saviour stance towards its working-class students such that students experience it as largely supportive and working in their best interests, even if they do not enjoy some of the processes. The quote which heads this section summarises what many white working-class boys seem to feel; there is no antipathy to the school, they feel it is

doing a good job, but they don't actively enjoy what they experience. They locate the fault in themselves or the wider system of education, rather than in the school.

The privileging of academic attainment

In School B (as in School A), academic achievement is privileged above the social and emotional aspects of school life. However, participation and achievement in PE and the arts is celebrated and there are high quality facilities for subjects such as Food Tech and Resistant Materials, both of which are popular subjects with white working-class pupils (and others). The narrow academic focus is therefore not as stark as at School A. However, its presence intersects with white working-class masculinity and a lack of attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning to create a dissonance between home and institutional habitus which subtly prompts students to feel that they cannot fully be themselves and thrive; that excelling in education is 'not for them'.

Like School A, curriculum decisions make clear that 'academic' subjects constitute greater institutional capital. All students are required to choose either geography or history GCSE (or both), which are part of the Ebacc. Whilst the KS4 students '*quite like*' these options, Ben says '*I would have picked business, over history*' had he been able to. Across all three schools KS4 students report enjoying their option subjects more than others, because of interest in the subject. In School B, favoured option subjects include PE, IT, Food Tech and Business Studies but there is only space to choose two of these less 'academic' subjects, which represent weaker forms of institutional capital.

A similar message is conveyed in the way that KS4 intervention (targeted, additional learning time) is managed. Ben enjoys PE, is taking it for GCSE and would like to pursue a career in sports management but has fallen behind with the theory side of the course. He would like to attend an after-school PE session but cannot because he has compulsory English intervention. The school may argue that they prioritise attendance at English over PE intervention for the student's own good, since a pass in English is important for the student's next steps as well as the school's results.

However, the removal of agency and message that the subject the student enjoys and identifies with most does not carry such institutional capital, impacts on engagement. Whilst Ben acknowledges that English intervention is *'sometimes helpful'*, most of the time *'I feel like it's dragging on, I don't really listen, I just want to get home'*, which is not a mindset for effective learning. In contrast, he is motivated to attend the PE intervention. As I argue in the chapter on learner identity, maximising success in one area can strengthen the way a student learns in other subjects; allowing Ben to catch up and excel in PE may boost his confidence and therefore enable greater overall achievement than grudgingly sitting through weeks of English intervention sessions.

As with School A, the privileging of academic attainment can also be seen in the distribution of resources. In School B there was widespread disruption for years 7-10 caused by core subject teachers being taken away from their regular timetables to deliver extra teaching to year 11 in the run up to GCSE exams. This prompted disengagement and students feeling that they were not valued. A teacher talks about the critical impact on her Year 10 case study student James, who had been finally engaging and making rapid progress before repeated cover interrupted the process:

'I do think that the students react really badly to being on cover... because they feel that you don't love them anymore, I really believe that they feel a bit abandoned..... but of all the students who struggled the most it's been James, who's really just opted out,..... he was the only student who refused to even attempt most of the questions' (Julie, staff, School B)

The mark James got on this assessment determined his set placement in year 11: he was moved down, away from the teacher whose two terms of hard work had enabled him to flourish. It is ironic that he will be intensely prioritised as a year 11 student but that lack of priority whilst in year 10 set him back and created more work for his year 11 teacher. As discussed in the next chapter, the relationship between student and teacher can be regarded as social capital which helps students access the institutional capital represented by academic attainment. In this example, decisions about institutional capital were prioritised over social capital even though the latter are an important bridge to the former.

Liam, a KS3 student, speaks of the disruption to his learning:

'I find it hard to focus when I have a supply teacher. Because of the GCSEs I'm constantly having to change rooms, having different teachers. [The work set is] nothing compared to what we usually do. It's... not joined in with the work that we've been doing at all.' (Liam, student, School B)

Liam is a well behaved, high prior attaining student. However, he did not work at all during the covered English lesson that I observed. Underachievement of high prior attainers is the school's main concern in relation to white working-class students. Yet short term focus on institutional capital blinds them from thinking holistically about the social capital needed to secure educational engagement. This example illustrates how doxa can perpetuate the very problems the system wants to address.

Lack of attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning and a doxic view of knowledge can also be seen within certain curriculum areas. The school takes part in a laudable music programme which provides every student with a violin, viola or flute and weekly lessons. Johnny is a KS3 student who is learning the violin. He says this about his experience of music at school:

'I don't really like it, I hate all that posh music, I find music a way to express yourself and by forcing a student to play an instrument they don't want to play I don't really do well in that subject..... I really wanted to play the guitar, I've got my own guitar at home, a shame I can't play it' (Johnny, student, School B)

When asked how he was getting on the following term, he reports:

'I'm still learning violin, which is really boring, especially as we're doing Ode to Joy. It's really not my type of music at all, whatsoever' (Johnny, student, School B)

The school may argue that the provision of access to socially and historically sanctioned knowledge is about entitlement and that there is a moral purpose to this approach to music. However, having alien music foisted upon him does not feel relevant, enjoyable or inspiring. The approach to music in School C seems very different: pupils learn skills by playing music which appeals to them and is congruent with their home habitus and the subject is cited as a favourite by two KS3 students, including one who struggles.

Undervaluing the social and emotional aspects of learning

At School B the school ethos promotes academic achievement and orderly behaviour. The latter is in order to make the former possible. Whilst there are reasonably high rates of compliance and students seem to accept that they are expected to work and behave in lessons, the behaviour policy and approach to engagement means that behaviour is always being contained. During one tracked day, the threat of internal exclusion and accompanying detention was used in every single lesson in order to maintain order. It was a regular feature on other days too. In many lessons, good student behaviour appeared to be a response to this external motivation rather than intrinsic motivation or engagement in the lesson.

Simmering behaviour issues make it difficult to treat students as individuals and to hear their points of view. It could be argued that pupil-centred practices are also incompatible with the approach to teaching and learning. Pedagogically, the school subscribes to Rosenshine's principles of instruction, which one teacher describes as a *'sort of lecture style for kids'* (Sam, staff, School B) and another as *'didactic'* (Julie, staff, School B). There is little space for discussion. Indeed, Sam states: *'I try and discourage [discussion] really.....because you can't talk your way to a correct fact'* (Sam, staff, School B).

Student progress is tracked meticulously, there is a thorough intervention programme for year 11 students and an extensive behaviour system. However, of 52 lessons observed, there were only three in which students were 'in flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014); where all students were fully engaged and there was a

calm and purposeful atmosphere in the room. For the most part, the pedagogic approach and behaviour system therefore only *appears* to generate a fully effective atmosphere for learning.

The pastoral system is perceived by teachers as strong: the school do everything they can to avoid excluding pupils; heads of year provide a consistent point of contact with home and know their cohort well. However, students, parents and teachers said that heads of year are overstretched and often unavailable, and no student mentioned their tutor as someone they would go to in times of need. There is therefore a degree of mismatch between staff perception and student experience with regards to pastoral provision.

The school claims to have a broad and inclusive ethos. Near the start of the first teacher focus group, Sam states:

'[The school values] broader well-rounded students rather than just [being] an exam factory' (Sam, staff, school B).

This echoes the official rhetoric and is the impression the school wants to give and likes to believe of itself. However, another teacher points out that students often do not feel the care that the school intends:

....from conversations with the students, they just think oh exams, we're just numbers, we're just targets (Helen, staff, school B)

This relates to Donnelly's '*ethos of inward attachment*' (students' '*thoughts, feelings and perceptions*' p.151) and draws attention to the discrepancy which exists between these dimensions. The privileging of academic attainment and lack of attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning is conveyed to students through the structural and organisational aspects detailed above. A teacher acknowledges this:

At the moment there is a lot of emphasis on results and a lot of emphasis on academic performance perhaps more so than pastoral (staff, School B)

As in School A, what the school believes about itself is therefore at odds with what at least some groups of students experience. This dissonance contributes to the disengagement of white working-class students as they feel themselves to be a cog in a machine which is not congruent with their home habitus, without the agency to mould a better fit.

In many ways the school feels assiduous, caring and orderly. However, there is not much space for students to be themselves. All participants were asked what they would change if they had a magic wand. One parent responded: *'he didn't feel like he had to change himself'*. Her son is Liam, a high prior attainer who had always been sensitive and oriented to learning. Since starting at secondary school however she has a sense that he feels that he needs to change to fit in, hide his worker persona, develop an attitude, and avoid being the teacher's pet. Here the institutional habitus structures his personal habitus and the way he operates in the field of school, but not in ways the school intends. Another boy spoke of feeling too vulnerable to express his true self:

'as we're in secondary school now, people will judge you and make fun of your actions so I can't express myself the way I would like to express myself because I'm afraid that I might get picked on and I don't want that, that's already happened' (Johnny, student, School B)

Much has been written about the seeming incompatibility of academic and white working-class masculine identities. I will return to this issue of gender in the following two chapters. In terms of institutional habitus, the lack of attention invested in the social and emotional aspects of learning means that white working-class boys in School B get by but do not excel. The focus on academic achievement in a context where engagement and individuality are in the background, does not appeal. It is not that white working-class culture is pathologized, as it is in School A. But neither is diversity and individuality nurtured, as it is in School C. As such it is hard for them to feel a sense of belonging within the educational system.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's notion of doxa enables us to perceive that practices in schools are shaped by the values and assumptions of dominant groups and enacted through symbolic violence and misrecognition. This helps to unpick why white working-class students' felt experience of school can result in disengagement and distrust. It can also help to explain why school leaders who are keen to 'close the gap' and see education as the route to social equality are unable to see how the very practices they adopt can alienate their target students.

In the current landscape, schools are under more pressure than ever to meet performance targets and generate high value exam results which cushion them from scrutiny by Ofsted. As with a range of educational policies, schools are pressured into moving in a particular direction but do still have some control over how they enact, or mediate, these forces. This is illustrated neatly by how school A and school C deal with the issue of modern foreign language (MFL) trips. School A does not allow the MFL department to take students who are studying GCSE French or Spanish to those countries as part of a school trip. The disruption caused to the timetable is deemed to be greater than the impact on exam results. This is frustrating for MFL teachers and students alike and is one reason why a popular young MFL teacher is leaving. School C, in contrast, does take students on such trips. Students are excited and motivated by the opportunity and staff and students alike enjoy the experience. Along with linguistic practice, cultural capital and social bonds are cited as benefits. It is therefore possible to have high academic standards as well as to embrace broader values, although the current climate makes this balance difficult.

The three research schools are geographically close and are similar in terms of deprivation and proportion of White British Pupil Premium students. They are under the same governmental pressures and produce similarly high GCSE results. However, the experience of being a white working-class student at each school is markedly different. The summary below encapsulates the broad sense of how institutional habitus interacts with white working-class identity in each school. It is of course important to note that no school or group is homogenous and that there are necessarily divergent experiences.

In School A, white working-class students and their families are often alienated by a narrow academic ethos which pathologizes working-class culture and seeks to 'save' them with a missionary zeal. Alienation is exacerbated by a dissonance between the official ethos and felt experience (Donnelly, 2000) which leads to inauthentic respect and makes it difficult for students to feel that the school is acting in their best interests. This group of students in particular are stripped of institutional power (Graham, 2012) and are resentful of the school's attempts to make them conform. There is a clash of habitus and the way in which the school misrecognises the students' capital reduces their power to operate in the field of school. This has implications not only for current students but for future generations as a history of marginalisation is perpetuated.

School B also privileges academic attainment in a way which undervalues the social and emotional aspects of learning. However, it functions more like a well-oiled machine than a missionary and keeps students 'on board' without inspiring genuine engagement with learning. The identity issues raised for white working-class boys in a habitus which privileges academic achievement make it difficult for them to thrive. Their interests and forms of capital mean that they do not have power within the field of school and find ways to 'get by' rather than develop their individual talents.

White working-class students at School C express a greater sense of belonging and engagement with school than those at either School A or School B. In contrast to the latter schools, where ethos is used as an instrument of power and conformity, at School C there is an emphasis on individuality, student perspective and well-being. Students are perceived and act as co-constructors of their experience such that there is a balance between way that they structure and are structured by the institutional habitus and there is a high level of congruence between the official and felt ethos. Various forms of capital are valued which enables students to 'be themselves' and have agency. As such, this school is closer to using ethos to '*prefigure alternative, more socially just, worlds*' (Bragg & Manchester, 2017, p.2) than most.

Donnelly and Alder draw attention to the centrality of social interactions and felt experience to school ethos. The next chapter focuses on relationships and the ways in which they build and constitute social capital. It thus fleshes out how the ethos in each school is both manifest and created.

Chapter 6: Relationships

Introduction

Relationships matter. They matter in many areas of life, including the learning process and educational settings. The importance of relationships to the engagement and achievement of white working-class students is the strongest and most consistent finding in my research. However, the pressure that schools are under to privilege academic attainment means that the social and emotional aspects of learning (of which relationships are a part) are often seen as secondary.

In 2005, as part of New Labour's educational drive, the National Strategy widely disseminated resources, guidance and training on the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL). This framework put such aspects at the heart of the learning experience and encouraged schools to review their curriculum and pedagogy in order to make more visible the ways in which teachers could support pupils. However, the arrival of the coalition government in 2010 and Gove's focus, as minister of education, on standards and traditional values, meant that this drive was largely abandoned. Since then, increased performance pressures and accountability have continued to push the social and emotional aspects of learning to one side (Reay 2017), particularly in secondary schools (Gross 2021).

When I started teaching as a qualified teacher in 2000, my role as a form tutor was a central part of my identity within the mixed comprehensive urban school in which I worked. My tutor group bore my initials and their successes, disgraces and group identity were linked to me in loco parentis. I spoke to the mothers of two white working-class boys every Friday afternoon to catch up about the week. This was perceived by all concerned as key to keeping the boys engaged and on track rather than in danger of exclusion.

However, in the course of this research, 20 years later, no student mentioned their tutor as someone they would go to in a time of need and few teachers talked about their tutor group as they drew on their experience of white working-class students. Students did not see the value of tutor time or PSHE lessons and the PSHE lessons I observed were either taught by teachers who did not know the students and/or by teachers I perceived to be pedagogically weak. Indeed, as mentioned when

reflecting on the fieldwork, in a PSHE lesson about suicide the teacher was unaware that the student I was tracking had attempted suicide within the last year. Instead of being a safe space in which this student and others could explore such a sensitive issue, it was a traumatic experience and the student left the room in tears. As discussed in the previous chapter, organisational decisions structure and are structured by the institutional habitus and thus communicate what the school values. In this case, that the school does not sufficiently value the social and emotional aspects of learning to properly resource PSHE provision or the tutorial system.

As taught in initial teacher training, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) demonstrates that for people to engage with higher cognitive processes, a foundation of more basic and psychological needs must first be met. This means that for students to learn effectively, they need to feel safe, supported by secure relationships and have a sense of accomplishment, or self-esteem. This is similarly recognised by the Trauma Informed approaches that are taking root in many schools and other social institutions (Scotland 2016) in which relationships are a central pillar.

Relationships both create and are manifestations of school ethos. I argue that schools with a narrow academic ethos, such as Schools A and B, often do not explicitly nurture relationships. Whereas schools with a broader more inclusive ethos, such as School C, tend to value and invest in relationships in a more systematic way. There is of course heterogeneity in any school such that relationships and types of teacher are not uniform. Schools A and B contain many teachers who highly value and invest in the relationships they have with students. In these schools such individual care and attention is greatly appreciated by students and their families. However, their efforts are not supported by institutional structures and processes. Conversely, there are teachers in School C whose focus is delivering curriculum content and who do not perceive relationships as part of this endeavour. However, taking into account such heterogeneity, there is an observable correlation between how students feel in school and the emphasis placed on relationships and well-being by the school ethos.

In this context, the salient relationships are those between teacher and student, peer relationships, and the relationship between home and school. This chapter is

organised around these three sets of relationships in order to draw attention to consistent themes across the research schools. At times, however, the identity of a school is foregrounded in order to explore the interaction between the particular ethos of a school and the relationships in operation.

Relationships give rise to forms of social capital which can support or undermine engagement with school. Academically supportive social capital develops from strong relationships between teachers and students and between home and school. Such social capital empowers students and parents/carers to access support and increases a sense of belonging. It can also develop from peer relationships when students encourage each other to value academic success.

However, when social groups (such as the white working-class) are marginalised and/or when there is insufficient attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning to support integration of values, peer relationships can also fuel the growth of what I term 'oppositional' social capital. This constitutes skills and behaviours which, within the institutional habitus, are seen as antithetical to academic achievement, but have value within students' home habitus or wider youth culture. Peer relationships can thus generate social capital which supports academic achievement because it is aligned with institutional values, or a type of social capital which undermines engagement because of a perception that it is incompatible with or in opposition to institutional values.

Students are often caught between, or required to simultaneously play, two 'games': that which operates in the field of school and involves the manipulation of institutionally sanctioned capitals; and that which operates in the field of youth culture and involves the manipulation of social and symbolic capitals which may or may not be compatible with the institutional habitus of school. Greater congruence between home and school habitus means that the rules of these games are reasonably similar for middle-class students. However, the mismatch experienced by working-class students can make it harder to balance the demands of both 'games' successfully.

I argue that supportive relationships mitigate against the clash of habitus that white working-class students can experience in moving between their home and school

environment. Such relationships have the capacity to validate a wider range of capitals than schools usually recognise and thus empower students and their families to navigate the field of school without compromising their working-class identities. They also contribute to the development of forms of social capital which promote engagement with school. Conversely, weak or problematic relationships exacerbate a dynamic in which white working-class students distance themselves from school and what it stands for. Weak teacher-student and home-school relationships make misrecognition more likely such that students and their families are not seen as intelligible within the paradigm of 'ideal learner' or 'supportive parent'. Whilst problematic peer relationships can fuel the growth of oppositional social capital.

The three research schools occupy different points along a continuum in relation to ethos and this correlates to the degree to which relationships are supported by systems and processes. However, in all three schools, insufficient attention is paid to the power of peer relationships. Students' experiences are therefore often shaped by unhelpful peer pressure and social anxiety. This can undermine the efforts made at a teacher or school level to nurture teacher-student and home-school relationships.

The first section in this chapter explores the impact of teacher-student relationships: the ways in which strong relationships mitigate against habitus disjuncture for white working-class students and generate a form of social capital which supports students' engagement with school. The second considers home-school relationships; how some parents are more intelligible as supportive than others and the implications of this phenomenon. The third section focuses on peer relationships and identity in relation to school: how girls and boys navigate the competing demands of playing two 'games' and balance their investment in institutional and social capitals.

Teacher and student relationships

My research findings consistently highlight the importance of teachers. Students frequently cited their relationship with a teacher as the key reason for liking or

disliking a subject. Observational data also supports this: students respond well to teachers with a warm manner who have a personal connection with their students. Daisy (School C) articulates the distinction between types of teacher and her preference for teachers she has a 'bond' with:

'I feel like some teachers are only professional.... but some teachers you feel more comfortable around, you can have a laugh with them and you have some sort of bond with them. But with the professional teachers, all they worry about is work' (Daisy, student, School C)

The teachers who are 'only professional', without the warmth of a human connection, are preoccupied by covering curriculum content and the cerebral aspects of students' being. The narrow focus and 'worry' in the final phrase bring to mind teachers under performance pressure. The other type enable Daisy to feel 'comfortable', a characteristic associated with home.

Taken in context, this quote does not undermine the value of professionalism in teachers. Indeed, firm boundaries are appreciated and respected. Mandy (School A) makes a distinction between teachers whose strictness facilitates learning and those who are 'just strict for the sake of it', perhaps from desire to assert their own power or that of the institution:

"it depends what they're strict about, like if they're strict about what you're learning about and they actually care, but then there's some teachers that are just strict for the sake of it. The ones that are strict with reasons they gain my respect" (Mandy, student, School A)

The teachers she respects are focused on learning rather than power, and 'actually care'. The importance of 'care' recurs when Mandy talks about her Food Technology teacher:

'she'll always try her hardest to help you and make sure you understand. And before we can leave the lesson she'll make us give a definition or something so she checks we actually understand and are improving instead of just letting

us go. Like she actually cares about it. And she'll usually give up her time when people haven't finished and stuff like that' (Mandy, student, School A)

Rigorous pedagogy is in evidence here as the teacher insists that the students demonstrate their understanding before leaving the lesson. However, it feels motivated by 'care' and is therefore appreciated. The teacher's willingness to 'give up her time' to help students finish is similarly taken as a token of her 'care'. There are plenty of teachers who keep students behind if they have not finished their work. However, the relationship here between teacher and students means that this is experienced as supportive and does not remove agency from the student, as a detention would do. The relationship with this teacher can be seen as a resource, a form of social capital which empowers students in the field of school.

These findings corroborate those of Travers (2017). Her book about academically successful white working-class boys is called '*Teachers Matter*'. One of the common factors in the experience of the 15 young men she researched was a particularly supportive teacher who acted as a mentor to the student. This person was interested in and cared for the student as an individual and used their own cultural and social capital to help the student envisage and navigate a successful pathway to university.

In my research, parents' comments also support the sense that their children's success in school is closely bound up with the relationships that they have with their teachers. Gemma's mother (School C) says:

'good relationships with the teachers are very important for Gemma – that helps her leaps and bounds' (Gemma's mother, School C)

Gemma herself talks about the importance of one particular teacher:

'she's like a mum but a mum from school. Like you look up to her like a mum or an auntie or something like that and you just trust her with everything.'
(Gemma, student, School C)

Gemma has been through significant difficulties in her home life and with friends at school. The strength of the support she feels from school is conveyed in the image of this teacher as *'a mum from school'*, someone she can *'trust with everything'*, *'look up to'* and turn to. The elision of the role of mother and teacher suggests that there are at least some elements of school which feel as comfortable as home. Instead of experiencing a clash of habitus, strong relationships have created a bridge between home and school.

Teachers also see the value of strong relationships with their students. Annie (School A) talks about how knowledge of Molly (her case study student) before she started teaching her helped create a positive working relationship and avoid the kinds of volatile behaviour which often get Molly into trouble.

'my knowledge of her before teaching her in the classroom setting has been really helpful in terms of keeping her on track in lesson and also just being able to understand the student. You know the more knowledge you have of a student the easier it is to get the most out of their learning' (Annie, teacher, School A)

Annie sees a clear link between *'knowledge...of a student'* and effective learning. Later in the interview she relates how upset Molly became when she was moved up a set in maths, away from a teacher with whom she had thrived. Annie uses words such as *'love'* to describe how Molly feels about her teacher and *'a feeling of abandonment'* when Molly was told she was moving. Like the *'mum from school'*, the cherished teacher is symbolic of more than a *'professional'*. In this context, a relationship is more important to Molly than the signifier of academic success denoted by moving up a set. However, for the school, the quest for institutional capital (in the form of qualifications) blinded them to the value of social capital: further evidence for a mismatch between institutional and home habitus which is felt on an experiential level.

Indeed, in School B, relationship trumped pedagogy in maths to the extent that Billy purposely got answers wrong in an assessment in order to remain in a low set with a teacher with whom he felt comfortable. I observed him with both this teacher and the

higher set teacher, who I perceived as pedagogically stronger but had no visible personal connection with Billy. There were several examples in this school of set changes which had been occasioned by a poor relationship between teacher and student or where a new teacher had transformed a student's experience of a particular subject.

I argue that whilst teacher student relationships are important for all students, they are particularly important for white working-class students, in part because of the value that relationships have within working-class culture. Assumptions should not be made about working-class lives as a homogeneous group. However, the existence of such values is supported by research. Lareau (2003) finds that close contact with a circle of family and neighbours is a defining feature of working-class childhood and is in contrast to middle-class children who spend more time with a sports coach, for example, than a grandparent. Travers cites Archer et al (2010) and Appadurai (2004) in her discussion of how *'many working-class people find it difficult to be separated from locality'* (2017, p.85). She argues that this affects choice of university and the tendency to maintain close ties with family and friends at home. This value system is at odds with that of many schools in which academic attainment holds the privileged position. The habitus mismatch may contribute to the disjunction that working-class pupils feel in school when what is important to them is seemingly disregarded by school systems.

As I will discuss in the third section of this chapter, teacher-student relationships are also particularly important for white working-class students because of the way they circumnavigate the problematic activation of group identity, institutional marginalisation and the development of 'oppositional' social capital.

Home and school

All of the parents interviewed in my research want the best for their child. However, the type of support they are able to provide and the challenges they face influence their relationship with the school and also the relationship with their child. The more similar their parenting approach is to normalised middle-class practices (Vincent,

2001), the easier it is for the school to experience them as engaged and supportive. The further away they are, the less intelligible they are to the school as supportive parents and whatever strengths they have are at greater risk of being misrecognised. This dynamic is particularly noticeable at Schools A and B which both have a narrow vision of what it means to be successful. School C still has difficulties with some parents but the more inclusive ethos and greater investment in relationships enables a wider range of behaviours and people to be intelligible.

The easily intelligible family

Molly's family (School C) is comparable to those of the young men in Travers's research (2017). Like them, she comes from a supportive home in which study habits are nurtured and there is a strong sense of the value of higher education. Molly perceives parental support as critical to her success: *'I think obviously my mum and dad help a lot'* (Molly, student, School C). She mentions her parents several times in both group and individual interview, such as citing conversations about careers and that her mother accompanied her to a taster day at UCL. The messages she receives about the value of education are clear. As she relates, her mother tells her:

'When you're in school, you work hard, like during the week you come home, do homework and things like that, do revision and then on the weekends that's when you can go and enjoy yourself.' (Molly, student, School C)

These attitudes and practices are congruent with a middle-class habitus and enable parents such as Molly's mother to be easily experienced by the school as supportive.

Unintelligible families in Schools A and B

Leanne (School A) also receives clear messages about the value of education:

'my mum's a single mum and she really wants us to do good in life. She tells me and [my sister] don't muck about with anyone and just get on with our work' (Leanne, student, School A)

However, as set out in the case study in the previous chapter, according to teachers, Leanne's mother has a difficult relationship with the school, characterised by inconsistency and lack of engagement. The same could be said of Billy (School B). His father has conveyed the importance of reading and writing. Billy states: *'if you can't read and write then you're going to have a hard life'* and reports that at home he *'earn[s] screen time by reading'*. Billy's father supports his recent passion for horse-riding and the contact it gives him with children from a higher social class. These values are suggestive of 'aspiration'. However, he says this of homework:

'I'm not spending the whole time with my children fighting about homework'
(Billy's father, School B)

He talks about such conflict as *'counterproductive to family relationships'*. He tells Billy that he has to attend (or navigate) detentions as a consequence of not doing homework but, as a single father with several other children, he is not willing to do more. He also reports difficulties communicating with the school. He is frustrated that the Head of Year does not return his calls. This is in contrast to the mother of Liam (a well behaved and high prior attaining boy) who praises the quick response of the same member of staff.

Both Leanne and Billy read fluently but present some challenging behaviour and do not complete homework. The latter two characteristics are not congruent with School A or School B's vision of an ideal learner and this affects the home-school relationship. Leanne's mother's relationship with the school has also been influenced by the problematic behaviour of her older daughter. Communication between home and school is more often for negative than positive reasons: notification of a homework detention or behaviour problem.

Vincent's work (2001) demonstrates that levels of parental education and current occupation correlate to the degree of agency that parents experience in their relationship with their child's school. These factors link to social class and status. It may follow that other factors affecting social status, such as single parenting, can also impact levels of agency. Leanne's mother and Billy's father are working-class, single parent families whose children are eligible for free school meals. Their

lifestyles do not support the regular completion of homework and their children exhibit challenging behaviour in school. In a similar way that Leanne and Billy are not intelligible as ideal learners (Youdell 2003, 2006), I suggest that their parents are not intelligible to School A and School B as supportive parents.

Strong home-school relationships support students to succeed at school and are particularly important for students experiencing difficulties. However, Leanne's mother and Billy's father lack agency in their interactions with school because of the power dynamic created by their child often being in trouble at school, their own lower social status and the normalisation of middle-class parenting practices which mean that their cultural logic is viewed through a deficit lens. Their support for their child's education could constitute a form of capital but is instead misrecognised and wasted.

The interview with Poppy's mother (School A) gives insight into the challenges of bringing up a teenager and the critical role of a strong relationship between home and school. She explains that in primary school, she relied on her good relationship with the class teacher to corroborate or challenge Poppy's version of events. This level of trust means that the parent and school can work together, which is important in addressing any behaviour or work concerns. However, in secondary school, there are many more teachers and often no easy or direct contact between a parent and particular teacher. If there is a discrepancy between the child and school's version of events (as reported by several students and parents in School B), the parent is caught in a difficult place. Unless the parent has a high level of trust and belief in the school, and/or the capitals to navigate access and communicate effectively with the school (both traits more associated with middle-class parents), it is understandable that a parent will support their child rather than the school. They are then placed in a conflicting and difficult position which may make them feel powerless in relation to both their child and the school.

'Powerless' is a word used by several teachers in School A to describe parents who do not have a strong relationship with the school. It is linked with inconsistent behaviour (such as displayed by Leanne's mother) and/or disengagement. Conversely, a strong relationship between home and school mitigates against the distance which often grows when a student transitions to secondary school and

provides the parent with social capital: access to support as well as power to both navigate the field of school and the challenges of bringing up a teenager.

Poppy's mother has forged just such a relationship with the Head of Year 7 and clearly attributes her happiness with the school to this relationship. She feels she can contact her easily, that they speak often and that she trusts her to deal effectively with issues as they arise. Leanne has the same head of year and both girls report a strong relationship with her. However, Leanne's mother does not benefit from a similarly supportive relationship. I suggest that this is because Leanne's mother is less intelligible as a supportive parent. A more inclusive ethos and better systematic investment in home-school relationships is needed to enable her to work with the school to support her daughters rather than be marginalised by its processes. As it is, Leanne is caught in a 'them and us' dynamic which prevents her being effectively supported by either school or home. A similar dynamic is at work with Billy and his father.

Invisible struggles

In contrast, Liam's family (School B) is intelligible as supportive and engaged, as is Liam as a learner. His mother reports good communication with the school and feels that her son is doing well. However, even for her there is a sense of unease and powerlessness in relation to several aspects of her son's schooling which is embryonic of the more disaffected experience of Leanne and Billy's parents. Liam's mother says this of the transition from primary to secondary school:

'It's horrible as a parent, I feel completely disconnected. I feel I have to interrogate..... I don't know his friends' (Liam's mother, School B)

The disconnection she now feels implies that she felt connected when Liam was in primary school, probably through regular access to and communication with his teacher (constituting social capital) as Poppy's mother explained. Lack of knowledge is identified as the key problem now; in order to find out about his day and friends she has to '*interrogate*' her son. She also speaks about struggling to help him with homework:

'I wish I could help out more [with homework] but it is like it is in another language' (Liam's mother, School B)

The desire to help is there but lack of appropriate capitals is a critical barrier: the work is so incomprehensible that it might as well be in *'another language'*. If this 'supportive' parent is struggling with the demands of their year 7 child's homework, it is not surprising that those who are less intelligible as supportive reject the role that school casts for them. Liam's parents conform to middle-class parenting practices but privately struggle to provide support with homework and to feel connected to their son's schooling experience. Leanne and Billy's parents do not conform and refuse the schools' implicit suggestion that they should do otherwise.

A strong relationship between a parent and at least one member of staff from the school is an important way to mitigate this unease and find productive ways forward through dialogue, rather than the imposition of a dominant value system. As with school ethos, a broader sense of what it means to be a supportive parent reduces the chances of misrecognition. Investment in relationships so that parents feel empowered, listened to and supported also develops social capital, which enables more students and families to engage productively with school.

The relationship between intelligibility and ethos

This is illustrated by two students and their families in School C, where the ethos is more genuinely inclusive and resources are invested in pastoral care to a greater extent than at School A or B. Here pastoral managers are employed solely to support the social and emotional needs of students; they may be tutors and teach PSHE but have no other teaching commitment. Sarah is one such manager. Both her case study students (Katie and Stella) come from extremely difficult home lives and yet Sarah maintains regular contact with their parents. Stella's mother is an alcoholic who is no longer allowed to look after her children. Sarah says of her:

'she's got her issues but [she's] obviously very caring' (Sarah, staff, School C)

She speaks more regularly with Stella's father, now the main carer, and says this of him:

'Her father is really really supportive and, I don't think he's supportive in terms of like going through schoolwork with her and making sure she does her homework but he's constantly on the phone to us making sure she's [OK]. He's very supportive' (Sarah, staff, School C)

Neither Katie, Stella, or their parents are intelligible, within the parameters used by most schools, as good students and supportive parents. They are more akin to Leanne and Billy and their parents. However, in the quotes above, Sarah sees beyond the challenges of circumstance and recognises the care Stella's parents have for their daughter. The school's more inclusive ethos and her role as pastoral manager, dedicated to the social and emotional aspects of learning, means that she sees monitoring homework as only one way of being a supportive parent; care and frequent dialogue between home and school are more important signifiers.

I would argue that it is the strong relationship between home and school and the communication this involves which enables Stella's father's care to be recognised and provides him with social capital which empowers him to work together with the school to support his daughter. This example suggests that if schools invest the right resources in nurturing relationships, parents and their children can both support and be supported by school, regardless of their social status or circumstances. In cases such as Katie (and possibly Stella) it may not be enough to secure academic attainment or to meet enough needs to enable the student to stay at mainstream school. However, it may potentially shift an historical relationship with the education system which may help the next generation.

Identity in relation to school

Many of the parents interviewed talked about their own disengagement at school and their desire for their children to do better than them. Whilst they encourage their children to work hard and behave well, Johnny's mother reveals a belief that most

people don't enjoy school when she rhetorically asks *'who does?'* (*Johnny's mother, School B*). It follows that application is because you ought to, like you ought to behave, rather than because it is enjoyable or interesting or because you are intrinsically motivated. This is a very different paradigm than that which operates in middle-class homes where a sense of entitlement and a belief in the importance of education mean that parents expect and seek out a stimulating and enjoyable educational experience for their children (Lareau, 2003).

In the course of this research, many teachers spoke about the impact of a parents' negative experience of schooling on the way they interact with the school and mediate their child's experience. Here is one example:

'parents have probably had a poor experience of school themselves and don't have the confidence about contacting school if they realise that their child is having difficulties' (*Moira, staff, School C*)

Reay (2017) and others (Walkerdine et al, 2001) discuss the role of intergenerational transmission of experiences of and attitudes to school. Such research suggests that parents who have had a negative experience of schooling themselves may be more likely to feel uncomfortable, unconfident and unsupported in their interactions with their child's school and to pass these attitudes onto their child.

Reay's book *Miseducation* (2017) details the class inequality perpetuated by the education system. Along with others (Sveinsson, 2009; Keddie, 2015), she is keen to see and document the commonality of experience between different ethnic groups. However, as cited in Chapter 1, she does make a distinction between the problematic historical relationship to education experienced by the white working-class and those of BME groups. As discussed in the previous chapter, the institutional habitus of schools is modelled on that of the middle-class. White working-class students therefore may not as readily identify with school as their middle-class peers (whose habitus is congruent with the school) or as pupils with an immigrant heritage (whose families may have a keen sense of the value of education).

In my research some schools are shown to privilege academic success and pathologise the working-class. In such cases, instead of identifying with the middle-class institution, working-class students may reject it as part of the process of affirming their own social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stahl, 2017). This will be exacerbated in schools in which working class pupils feel that their culture is being judged as inferior and their capitals are misrecognised. However, some form of this process may be in operation even where pupils do not feel overtly marginalised.

White working-class social identity therefore intersects with the middle-class habitus of school in a way which can prompt a rejection of school values or a distancing of self from academic success. My data suggests that strong relationships with teachers can get around this problem because the student interacts with the teacher as an individual rather than a representative of the school. Likewise, the pupil feels seen as an individual which enables their personal rather than group identity to be activated. Conversely, weak relationships with teachers and/or problematic peer dynamics exacerbate the problem because they activate the social identity (which struggles to identify with school) and so undermines the individual's attempts to succeed.

Teachers in all three schools talk about the importance of students feeling seen and heard as individuals:

'I do think that for some students....[it] is incredibly important they are listened to (Annie, staff, School A)'

'I think it does come down to this sort of knowing who he is, and he needs to know that I know who he is' (Sam, School B)

'Seeing her as a person in her own right makes a difference as far as she's concerned' (Moirra, staff, School C)

A strong teacher student relationship makes this kind of recognition more likely. I suggest that feeling seen and valued for who they are (rather than who the school might want them to be) supports the activation of individual rather than social identity.

It also mitigates against the experience of marginalisation or pathologisation as a member of a working-class group implicitly judged by the school system.

However, peer dynamics are powerful. For both boys and girls there are issues of identity and group acceptance which have the capacity to undermine engagement with school and fuel the development of oppositional social capital, regardless of the strength of teacher-student relationships or those between home and school. Gender differences were noted in the manifestation of these issues and are discussed in the next two sections. Broadly, boys tend to try to blend in and hide their individuality or interest whereas girls tend to overtly engage in psychosocial power struggles or do the opposite and withdraw from social interaction.

Peer relationships for boys

The seeming incompatibility of white working-class masculine identity and academic achievement has been well documented in the research literature (Youdell, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Evans, 2006; Ingram, 2009; Stahl, 2017; Travers, 2017). In my study, School B is a useful site for the examination of these issues. Congruent with the research literature, boys tended to play down their interest or ability and in group interviews more often spoke positively about 'socially acceptable' subjects such as PE, IT and business studies. However, in one-to-one interviews it was evident that social dynamics can be as upsetting as they are for girls and that muted interest is a learnt survival behaviour.

Johnny spoke openly about the difficulty he has with peers and how it impacts on his academic engagement. Here he talks about an incident which followed on from being seen to 'allow' another student to mistreat him:

'Two people were arguing cos they don't want to sit next to me. And he was like I don't want to sit next to him, did you see what so and so done to him. And that just really hurt me inside' (Johnny, student, School B)

There is a strong sense of a pecking order being established; it matters how you behave, who you are associated with and how you are perceived by others. Whilst some boys know how to play the game and either assert themselves or blend in sufficiently, others like Johnny get it wrong and are ostracised as a result. I would

describe Johnny as a quirky and sensitive student, but these characteristics do not have traction within his peer group. The pressure to conform is already affecting his ability to engage with expressive subjects such as drama:

'Drama should allow me to express myself, but mainly because we're in secondary school now, people will judge you and make fun of your actions so I can't express myself the way I would like to express myself because I'm afraid that I might get picked on and I don't want that. That's already happened to me' (Johnny, student, School B)

Johnny is learning quickly that self-censorship and blending in are necessary survival skills. However, if the arts are his potential strength, this undermines his chances of academic success and engagement with school. The capitals required to succeed socially and academically are at odds and there is no support to help him resolve the conflict.

Even students who are more successful in playing the game suffer from such peer pressure. Liam is a high prior attaining student; a typical example of what School B identify as their main concern in relation to white working-class underachievement. His mother's magic wand is:

'[If] he didn't feel like he had to change himself' (Liam's mother, School B)

She explains that he has always liked school and learning but since starting secondary school he feels he has to hide his worker persona in order to fit in and that there is danger in being identified as the teacher's pet. This is supported by observation; Liam gets on with his work enough to stay out of trouble but is easily distracted by peers and does not 'do the right thing' in situations where to do so would risk a 'swot' identity. For example, in a cover lesson he joins the majority and does not read the short story set, opting instead for 45 minutes of boredom fiddling with pens; in a library reading lesson he maintains a constant subtle banter with classmates under the pretence of reading, despite telling me that he likes to read and does so at home. His attention is more on his peer group than work, except where he has a particularly skilful teacher. He thus invests more in social than

institutional capital. Although he is doing enough to get by, over time this orientation and lack of full engagement is likely to result in underachievement; a pattern which the school recognise and are concerned by.

Social image is overtly talked about by two teachers in relation to their case study students. James, a year 10 student, presents as the class clown and makes a conscious effort to maintain this image:

'he has increasingly done better and better work but he still performs not being interested.....I don't think I've met many students who are so keen to conceal their attempts at work, conceal their interest or conceal their engagement' (Julie, staff, School B)

Julie has invested in her relationship with James and has seen noticeable progress in terms of his academic performance (quality and quantity of written work, for example). However, James still *'performs'* lack of interest and *'conceals'* any signs of engagement with work in a way which is consistent with the incompatibility of white working-class masculinity and academic achievement noted in the literature (Youdell, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Evans, 2006; Ingram, 2009; Stahl, 2017; Travers, 2017). Here, investment in oppositional social capital undermines James's ability to develop institutional capital.

The opposite is true of Sam's case study student Henry, who is keen to *'be seen as a good kid'* but is similarly preoccupied by image:

'he really wants to be seen as a good kid and when something happens that takes away from that good kid, hard-working image (which isn't really him if I'm honest, but it's who he wants to be) then that's when he gets frustrated and can get angry and get into fights and stuff' (Sam, staff, School B)

Henry has a difficult home life and is quick to anger and fight if he thinks someone has insulted him or his family. He responds well to Sam's attempts to nurture the student-teacher relationship to the extent that he retrieves Sam's stolen mobile phone from another student at the bus stop. The precarious nature of Henry's home

life may make the *'good kid'* image and associated institutional approval particularly important to him, together with relationships with teachers and friends which constitute important social capital.

Sam's case study notes include frequent references to Henry's best friend, another white working-class boy. Whilst the boys have the capacity to support each other, the friendship also presents problems:

'The two of them are quite close, but also it's a really toxic relationship' (Sam, teacher, School B)

The boys' friendship frequently derails their individual attempts to focus on work and triggers episodes of problematic behaviour as they goad or distract each other. Such toxicity is a common feature of the friendships between white working-class girls at Schools A and C (to be discussed shortly). My research shows that both white working-class boys and girls also share a tendency to form unhealthily monocultural friendships groups.

An experienced teacher at School B comments on the impact of friendship group and notices that white working-class boys with more diverse friendship groups tend to have a more positive attitude to school:

'I think their friendship group is really important, I think it has a huge impact, particularly if they are friends with a wider range of students, races, you know' (Louise, staff, School B)

She talks about two brothers; the older brother has a diverse friendship group and is doing well at school whereas the younger brother has latched onto a white working-class group and is struggling in terms of behaviour, work and attitude. This phenomenon is also apparent at School A where the most motivated and academically successful tracked student has a mixed friendship group and recognises the value of diverse perspectives:

'I prefer being in a multi-cultural school with a bunch of different types of people because I think you learn more, like not necessarily in school but like as life around you' (Mandy, student, School A)

Students whose meaningful social interactions include peers from families with a different relationship to the education system than that of the white working-class have access to a broader range of ways to interact with school and more educationally supportive social capital. Whilst there can be school related difficulties associated with the social identity of particular BME groups (Black Caribbean or Somali boys for example), diverse friendship groups have the potential to interrupt the messages conveyed by intergenerational transmission. However, schools may need to do more than celebrate diversity in order to nurture the development of academically supportive social capital and mitigate against the activation of oppositional social capital so that students can thrive both socially and academically.

Case study: Johnny

Johnny is a year 8 boy at School B, although he was in year 7 at the start of the research process. He seems vocal and outgoing in the focus group interview but in one-to-one interviews he reveals a vulnerable and sensitive side and talks openly about problematic social dynamics. He has been teased quite a lot and relates an incident near the start of year 7 when another boy bashed his head against the wall to the extent that he was concussed.

Johnny seems self-conscious about the way he is perceived by peers and worried about making himself vulnerable. He explained why he put up his hand to answer the extension but not main questions in a maths lesson: *'as they're a bit more difficult I like to put those up because it makes me look smarter'*. He struggled with maths in primary school, sees himself as weak in this subject and does not want to risk getting basic questions wrong.

As quoted in the body of this chapter, he enjoys drama but is worried about expressing himself because of the danger of being teased. He is the student who was upset by peers not wanting to sit next to him because of how he had responded

to a physical challenge. The phrases he remembers other students saying to him are: *'how did you let him do that?'* *'he made you look so light'* (weak).

Although he says that year 8 is better than year 7 and that friendship issues have settled down, I observe a Food Tech lesson in which he is without a partner until the teacher intervenes. Boys nearby harass him about his lack of partner. When asked about this later he explains: *'some students like to make other students miserable'*. By the end of the lesson, he is smiling and chatting with his partner. However, opportunities for pair work in this school are rare; friendship (and thus supportive social capital) is not supported by pedagogy in this way very often.

Johnny's mother does not mention his friendship issues. She refers to the concussion incident but says that the way the school dealt with it was *'fantastic'*: they were *'on the ball'*, communicated with her and monitored the situation. In general, she says she *'cannot fault'* the school. Teachers talk positively about her son and she is impressed by their commitment; her calls or emails are sometimes returned at 7pm. This shows the importance of the home school relationship, supported by timely and effective communication by the school and intelligibility as good student and supportive parent.

However, the way they both talk about his primary school is less positive. It seems that the experience was marred by problematic teacher-student and home-school relationships and possibly complicated by his mother's employment as a cleaner. Neither child or parent were intelligible, as a good student or supportive parent respectively. His mother says that she felt *'insulted'* when the Reception teacher suggested Johnny's behaviour was symptomatic of a *'broken home'*. She felt judged as a parent and in turn judges the teachers. Based on what she sees and hears as an employee she speaks of teachers who are just *'doing their time'* and have lost interest in the children and Johnny recounts a time when his mother complained to the school about his mistreatment at the hands of a particular teacher.

Although Johnny thrived with a few teachers who understood him, he had more negative experiences: *'primary was not a good time, at all, pretty much most of the teachers really didn't like me'*. The strong correlation between his enjoyment and his relationship with the teacher has continued into secondary school. As his mother says: *'he really does have to like the teacher'*. Academically his mother feels he has

'come on leaps and bounds' at secondary school. Although she also acknowledges that he would prefer to do anything other than schoolwork and that she would like it if he was more positive about learning.

Johnny feels that his teachers now *'like me more than my primary school teachers did'*. However, he is sensitive to these relationships and links his enjoyment of a subject directly to the teacher: *'last year my Spanish teacher was really nice and now this year my Spanish teacher's really mean, so that's made me dislike the subject a bit'*. Both he and his mother talk about his preference for practical work and this is borne out by observation: drama, food tech, PE and practical science lessons are favoured. He is energetic and likes to run around and feels constrained by the lack of physical space to play games at break and lunchtime, an issue mentioned by other pupils.

This case study illustrates the importance of teacher-student and peer relationships in shaping students' experience of school. The difficult relationship Johnny had with many of his primary school teachers directly affected his ability to engage with learning and behave appropriately. The positive relationships that Johnny has with many of his secondary school teachers support him to enjoy his learning. However, insecurity regarding peer relationships and the pressure this exerts to protect a vulnerable, more expressive side, undermine his ability to thrive academically and socially.

Making and navigating friendships needs to be explicitly supported and also helped by more pair work in lessons and opportunities to play informal sports and games during break and lunchtime. Although the school deal well with overt conflict such as fights, organisational and ideological aspects do not support healthy peer relationships and thus the development of supportive social capital. For Johnny, difficulties with peers jeopardise rather than enhance his engagement and attainment.

The case study also illustrates the importance of home school relationships. The contrast between the relationship at primary and secondary school demonstrates how intelligibility is fluid and context dependent. It also emphasises the link between how a student is perceived and the school-home relationship.

Peer relationships for girls

Like boys, white working-class girls are also heavily influenced by social identity in a way which can make peer relationships detrimental to academic success. Several teachers in School C comment on the way that white working-class girls often form tight knit friendship groups which reinforce negative patterns of behaviour in relation to school:

'all her friends are the white working-class girls...and they feed off each other and bounce off each other, sometimes in a negative way' (Sarah, staff, School C)

Problematic peer relationships are directly linked to disengagement in lessons. The quotes below are about different students:

'I imagine she would do a lot better in a more motivated group.....without certain of her friends around her' (Pete, staff, School C)

'once she's off timetable, which is quite a lot, she knuckles down and does her work. She's so focused when there's no distraction from other girls' (Sarah, staff, School C)

Both comments convey the sense that the student's capacity to focus on work is compromised by the 'distraction' of peers. This can be because of the way the students 'bounce off each other' and incite each other to misbehave, or because of a psychosocial 'drama' (a word used by students and teachers in Schools A and C) which preoccupies them. Carol explains how peer conflict interferes with her concentration in lessons:

'you won't really concentrate on what people's telling you.. you're just thinking what they've been doing to you and how they're treating you' (Carol, student, School C)

Thoughts and anxiety about social dynamics blocks out the teacher's voice and an ability to focus on the lesson. Powerlessness is conveyed in the use of the passive to describe herself in relation to the other girls' actions. Carol identifies a further way in which her friendship group interferes with her capacity to succeed as an individual:

'my relationships with teachers ain't that good because the people that I hang around with.... [teachers] don't really like them... teachers don't like the way they act they don't really pick us for anything..... they only pick the good children' (Carol, student, School C)

She feels that her group identity obscures her individuality and prompts teachers to make assumptions about her attitude to learning which impact on the relationship she has with them. Carol does not tend to misbehave; she is a student who is likely to fall *'under the radar'*, as teachers say of unobtrusive students. Like Liam and Johnny, she does enough work to get by and does not call attention to herself but over time is likely to underachieve because of a lack of full engagement and effort. Whilst strong relationships with teachers may support her learning, the friendship group she is part of interferes with this process and prompts her to disassociate from the *'good children'* who are favoured.

In both School A and School C there are accounts of students whose termination of one particular friendship is cited as the key in a dramatic change in attitude and experience of school. Gemma talks about what it used to be like with an ex-best friend:

'I was always arguing with her and we was going for each other all of the time, like nearly fighting and stuff. It was horrible' (Gemma, student, School C)

The problematic nature of this friendship is corroborated by other students in the focus group and by two separate teachers. However now Gemma is in a different, much more supportive friendship group and says this of them:

'your mates, they help you, they tell you to stop mucking about' (student)

The capacity for positive peer relationships is clear and was observed in a lesson where Gemma took on a supportive role for another friend and encouraged her to stay out of trouble, thereby bringing into play academically supportive social capital. Gemma's magic wand was to go back to year 7 and do school over again, with the friendship group and outlook she has now.

In School A there is a similar story about Emily's case study student Carly:

'She fell out with a significant other student, and she said all she did was bully me and make me feel bad about myself so I'm much happier not being around her' (Emily, staff, School A)

Emily and several other members of staff talk about Carly's transformation since the end of this friendship; not only is she much happier but she is also focused in lessons, comes to revision sessions and is making good academic progress. At the start of the research Emily invested in her relationship with Carly, who had just moved into her maths set and was anxious. A key focus was finding the right person for her to sit next to:

'we took quite a while, maybe a couple of weeks, to find the right place in the class for her to work....and I think that's made quite a bit of difference....definitely the most overriding thing is that checking in with her and saying how do you feel about this... making sure that she's with someone who she can work with, feels comfortable with' (Emily, staff, School A)

Emily's willingness to engage in dialogue with Carly about her seating position and emotional state are symptomatic of the 'care' referred to by Mandy and the 'bond' valued by Daisy. This supportive teacher-student relationship recognises the importance of peer relationships and takes time and effort to find and harness a dynamic which will nurture academically supportive social capital. The student who Carly ended up sitting with in maths became a key friend after the termination of the unhealthy friendship. Emily's careful attention to peer dynamics thus helped Carly nurture a friendship which would go on to support Carly in a wider transformation.

In my research, anxiety about making friends was one of the most frequent concerns mentioned by both boys and girls when talking about the move from primary to

secondary school. Yet aside from a few introductory activities, there is little explicit support to help students form, navigate and nurture healthy friendships. Debbie's case study student illustrates the difficulty students can face in making friends:

'she's incredibly quiet, she won't talk to any of the other students, it's really difficult to get her engaged with other students in PE. I know that she struggled to make friends throughout the year and I've just got from other teachers that she used to sit with other teachers at lunchtime, that kind of thing, and she really struggles with making friends.....she walked with me to the park and she just spoke to me the whole time and wouldn't really speak to any other students.....she's a lovely girl just really just funny with other students' (Debbie, staff, School C)

The student's capacity for conversation and social bonds is apparent in the way she spends time and talks with teachers and yet the anxiety and difficulty she has with her peer group surfaces throughout the quote. Not only will this impact her enjoyment of school, it also affects her engagement in collaborative learning activities.

Like Debbie, Linda (School A) also finds it difficult to interact with peers: *'I'm a bit more speakative when it's to people, like adults, rather than my age'*. By Year 10 she has stopped trying to make friends and spends her whole time in school alone which makes her feel *'miserable'*. She has chronic attendance issues which she links to her unhappiness and social isolation at school but there seems to be no support in place to tackle this issue.

Anxiety about peer relationships can manifest internally, through withdrawal, such as illustrated by Debbie and Linda, or externally, through the fights and arguments which are noted as so disruptive to other students. Katie, a student in School C who is notoriously loud and perceived as popular, admitted in a one-to-one interview that she had anxiety about making friends and felt that all except two cousins she spent time with at home, were *'fake'* friends. The *'drama'* which is prevalent in the friendship groups of white working-class girls (and others) may therefore stem from a similar anxiety as that which prompts others to withdraw.

As children grow up the influence of peers becomes ever greater. When the social identity of a group is compatible with, or condoned by the school, individuals are free to simultaneously thrive in both social and academic contexts (Hollingworth, 2015). This is true of middle-class students who, for all their rebellious ways, are more likely to excel academically than fail (Bottero, 2009); the smokers' group in Hollingworth's study both party and work hard and gain respect from the institution and peers for achieving a balance between investment in social and institutional capitals.

However, when the social identity of a group is marginalised, pathologised or disrespected by the school, individuals must choose between social acceptance and the possibility (unguaranteed) of academic success; between investment in social or institutional capitals. Or navigate a careful path between two identities. The tension between social acceptance and academic success is detailed in Ingram's study (2009) of the impact of school habitus on student identity in Northern Ireland. The experiences of boys at the grammar school in her study are analogous to those of students in School A and School B in my research, with their strong academic ethos.

Peer relationships for both white working-class boys and girls have the capacity to support engagement and achievement but more often undermine the individual's chance of success. This is because of complex social dynamics in which belonging to a group is set in opposition to belonging to the educational institution. Strong relationships between teachers and students and home and school can mitigate against this phenomenon. However, I would argue that unless peer dynamics are tackled directly, through explicit support for healthy friendships, the effects of supportive teacher-student and home-school relationships will be undermined.

Case study: Gemma

Gemma is a year 10 student at School C. She had a positive experience of primary school and has always enjoyed school and learning. When she was 7 years old she was diagnosed with diabetes. This was very difficult but mother and daughter have learnt to manage it '*as a team*'. School C was their first choice mainly because there were already several students with diabetes and they felt the school was equipped to deal with it. The same member of staff has dealt with Gemma's diabetes in school since she started which makes her mother feel '*relaxed*'. Gemma's mother and grandmother also attended School C and although her mother did not work very

hard, she thinks that familiarity with the school has positively affected their experience of it.

The family have *'been through hell'* in the last year with Gemma's dad leaving for another woman. However, both Gemma and her mother talk about a particular member of staff who has *'been amazing'* and say that the school has been an important *'support network'*. Although this member of staff is no longer Gemma's head of year (having been promoted within the school), Gemma and her mother still turn to her with any problem. She is the *'mum from school'* mentioned in the main body of this chapter.

Gemma's mother says that a good relationship with teachers *'helps my daughter leaps and bounds'*. Gemma is a warm and sociable girl whose resilience in the face of various difficulties in her life has been boosted by emotional support. As her mother says, she is *'very loved by a lot of people'*. However, *'wanting to keep up with the Joneses'* and trying to impress friends can be a barrier to engagement at school. From observation and interviews with Gemma it is apparent that she enjoys physical activity but does not like reading or prolonged periods of concentration at a desk. She engages well with science, in part because of a very skilful teacher, and completes her work to a reasonable level in other subjects. However, she has no desire to go to university and would rather follow in her father's footsteps and become an electrician through an apprenticeship.

Gemma's relationship with her best friend went badly wrong for complicated reasons when they were in year 9. It was sufficiently disruptive that the school agreed to change the girls' timetables so that they were never in the same classroom together. The difficulties she faced at home and school during this year distracted her from academic engagement. As she explains *'I had things going on and stuff like that'*. Gemma is now in a larger and more supportive friendship group who encourage her to work as well as have fun. As mentioned in the main body of the chapter, Gemma's magic wand is to go back to year 7 and do school again, with her current friendship group which activates academically supportive social capital.

Although Gemma is not a particularly academic student, she enjoys school and is doing well enough to be viewed as *'on track'*. This is in large part due to the positive relationships she has with teachers and friends. When there have been difficulties,

the strong relationship her mother has with the school and the social capital this has generated, has helped to activate support both for Gemma and for her mother. The school have demonstrated that they take Gemma's social and emotional well-being seriously through the consistency provided with her diabetes management, the continued access she and her mother have to the ex-head of year and the timetable adjustments which were made when the friendship deteriorated. This commitment has resulted in high levels of trust which enable Gemma to feel a strong sense of belonging within school and to navigate the academic demands without resentment or alienation.

Conclusion

Greater attention to the capacity for relationships to form a bridge across different habitus is key to empowering white working-class students and their families to navigate the field of school in a way which does not compromise their working-class identities. As set out in the previous chapter, a genuinely broad and inclusive school ethos which accords respect to the working-class is an important way to avoid or mitigate against marginalisation. The ethos that students and families experience (as opposed to official ethos) is created through social interactions. In order to develop such an ethos, attention must therefore be given to relationships.

In this chapter I have discussed how the data from parents, students and teachers show the importance of relationships. This echoes Travers' (2017) conclusions concerning the relationship between teacher and student and the role of home in academic success. My findings in relation to parents' relationships with school correlate with Lareau's (2003) findings that the normalisation of middle-class cultural logic puts working-class families at a disadvantage in their interactions with the school. I have argued that Youdell's notion of intelligible learners (2006) can be applied to parents to suggest that parents who are further away from normalised middle-class practices are less intelligible to the school as engaged. As a result, their support for their child's education is at risk of misrecognition and waste. I have highlighted the role of social status and agency in the home school relationship in a way which aligns with Vincent's work (2001) on parental engagement. I have linked

this to intergenerational transmission (Reay, 2017; Walkerdine et al, 2001) and the way in which the white working-class have a particularly difficult relationship with education because of a long history of marginalisation.

I have used these ideas to argue that white working-class social identity intersects with the middle-class habitus of school in a way which can prompt a rejection of school values or a distancing of self from academic success. This can be mitigated against by strong teacher student relationships which enable an interaction of individuals, partially freed from the social identities they represent. The development of social capital through strong home school relationships in which parents feel listened to, respected and empowered is also critical if white working-class parents are to be able to realise the support they intend. However, peer dynamics for white working-class students are often problematic and need explicit support if students are to collectively enjoy and engage with school and thereby achieve as well as their peers. Currently, academic attainment is privileged above the social and emotional aspects of learning which makes it difficult to address these issues on a systemic level. The idea of the learner identity (the way a student feels about themselves as a learner) brings together the academic and the social/emotional and is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Learner Identity (Part 1)

Introduction

Defining learner identity

Learner identity denotes the way a student feels about themselves as a learner and their orientation to learning (Pollard and Filer, 1996; Stobart, 2008; von Stumm et al, 2009 cited Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012). As discussed in the Literature Review, it has implications for academic achievement and social inclusion (Youdell, 2006) and is affected by pedagogy and school ethos (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012), social identity (Warin, 2010; Stahl, 2013) and experiences of learning outside school (Archer, 2012). In Bourdieusian terms, it is influenced by a child's home habitus, the institutional habitus of school and the way that these interact to shape a child's experience of learning.

Learner identity is fluid and can change over time. Strength or fragility is not innate to the person but a product of experiences in places such as home and school and linked to the capitals at a person's disposal when operating in a particular field. In broad terms, those who exhibit what I term a strong learner identity are confident, resilient and focused whilst those who exhibit what I term a fragile learner identity lack confidence and resilience and find it difficult to concentrate. In this and the following chapter I draw attention to experiences which weaken or strengthen students' learner identities rather than using these terms to suggest that fragility or strength is the responsibility of the student themselves. Whilst it might be more accurate to refer to 'learner identities made fragile', for ease of reading I use the term 'fragile learner identities' with constant awareness that these are not innate or fixed but created by context. 'Fragile' and 'strong' are two extremes of a continuum. People occupy a different place along the continuum in different subjects and fields, and these positions can influence each other: success as a learner in one context can boost a student's sense of themselves as a learner in other contexts.

This extends to extra-curricular pursuits in which students gain positive learning experiences in an activity they have chosen and enjoy and transfer the sense of

themselves as a learner into other experiences of learning. As Lareau (2003) found, investment in extra-curricular activities is a feature of middle-class parenting practices and is one way in which skills, attributes and capitals are 'cultivated' to make children more successful in school and life beyond. Other aspects of middle-class habitus also nurture a strong learner identity (in the context of Western schooling), such as encouragement of questioning, curiosity and experimentation, a literacy rich environment and exposure to experiences which build the types of cultural capital valued by the education system.

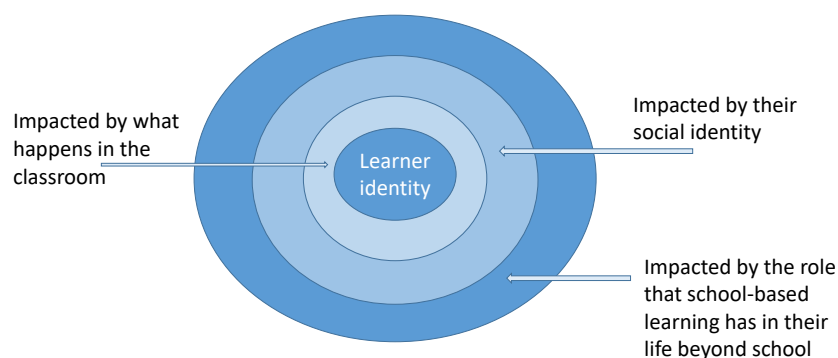
When middle-class children enter school, they often feel like 'fish in water' because of the congruence between home and school habitus (Bourdieu, 1992; Warin, 2010): familiar activities are present, similar behaviours for learning are expected and they respond well to child-centred competence-based pedagogies in which they are active, confident participants with agency and voice. However, working-class children may not have these traits so well developed or feel as secure in the school environment. In a highly pressured, performative context, this can prompt schools serving less advantaged children to adopt 'pedagogies of poverty' which emphasise discipline, passivity and compliance, all of which have a negative impact on learner identity (Lupton & Hempel Jorgensen 2012) and make it more fragile. This research saw both types of pedagogy in action. It also found evidence in support of previous research to suggest that pedagogies which promote active participation strengthen learner identity whilst those which encourage passivity weaken it. Institutional habitus and the classroom pedagogies and behaviours it gives rise to thus have a powerful role to play in structuring students' learner identities.

There is some correlation between learner identity, enjoyment and interest in that we tend to enjoy activities we are interested in and feel we are good at, and engagement fosters progress, creating a virtuous circle. However, having a strong learner identity is not simply enjoying a subject. For example, a student may find maths difficult and not particularly enjoy it but a skilful teacher, supportive environment and confidence in themselves as a learner may lead to the development of a reasonably strong learner identity in maths. Conversely, a student may enjoy drawing particular types of picture but resist learning about other styles or techniques and so exhibit a fragile learner identity in art lessons.

My research found that students with a strong learner identity, are able to learn and apply themselves in subjects and activities which they don't find intrinsically interesting. However, as explored in this chapter, those with learner identities which have been made fragile by their experiences struggle to engage with subjects which do not interest them. Like social and emotional issues, a fragile learner identity can manifest externally (for example behaviour issues) or internally (for example withdrawal) (Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1980). Both were observed in this research and are exemplified in the following sections. Participating teachers reported that the concept of learner identity helped them understand these manifestations and enabled them to put in place strategies to strengthen learner identity, which in turn improved behaviour and engagement.

The focus of this chapter

This research found that many (but not all) White British FSM students exhibit a fragile learner identity across a majority of school subjects, which affects their engagement and academic achievement. Learner identity is affected by what happens in the classroom, by the students' social identity and by the role that school-based learning has in their life beyond school. It can be viewed diagrammatically as at the centre of concentric circles (see figure below). Each of these layers interact with the aspects of school ethos and relationships discussed in the previous two chapters and can be explained using conceptual tools such as habitus, capital, field, misrecognition and symbolic violence.



This and the following chapter are organised according to these three layers. This chapter focuses on the first layer: what happens in the classroom. I identify two aspects which are critical: how *safe* a student feels in the classroom and how they are supported to take *responsibility* for their learning. Felt safety is linked to congruence between home and school habitus and how capitals are (or are not) recognised, developed and employed in the field of the classroom. Students' capacity to take responsibility for their learning is linked to student agency and how this operates in relation to institutional power. This is shown to be complicated by paradoxical forces inherent in neoliberalism which place responsibility on the individual but exercise structural constraints.

The way that a student interacts with the pedagogies of the classroom is affected by their relationship with the teacher, as suggested by the section in the previous chapter on teacher-student relationships; a strong relationship develops social capital and creates a bridge between home and institutional habitus. A combination of pedagogy and relationship thus determine levels of felt safety and responsibility. Teachers have some agency over the pedagogies they use. However, just as schools are structured by educational policies but have some agency in how they enact them, teachers are shaped and sometimes constrained by institutional habitus. A student's learner identity is therefore directly impacted by what happens in the classroom (pedagogy mediated by relationship) and indirectly impacted by institutional habitus, which is itself shaped by wider educational doxa.

Before moving into a discussion about what happens in the classroom (divided into a section on safety and another on responsibility) I will outline what a fragile identity looks and feels like, from the perspective of teachers and students.

Manifestations of a fragile learner identity

A fragile learner identity can manifest in various ways: low confidence; low resilience and thus ability to stay in the 'struggle zone' of learning or 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978), where most effective learning takes place; difficulty with concentration; behaviour issues. As with social and emotional issues, there can

be external and internal manifestations (Edelbrock & Adenbach, 1980). Katie's fragile learner identity manifests in problematic behaviours which are triggered by difficulty with concentration, peer relationships and low confidence. She says:

'I find it difficult to concentrate, it's my hardest thing, concentrating.....I can't be in a room with people and do my work because I get distracted really easily. I can't concentrate properly' (Katie, student, School C)

This was observed in action and corroborated by a member of staff who chose Katie as a case study student. Links between behaviour issues, lack of confidence and resilience were made by teachers in all three schools. In the quotation below the teacher sees low resilience at the root of '*delaying tactics*' and attention seeking behaviour:

'there's very little resilience in terms of getting things wrong and going OK that's fine, this is what I've learnt, I'm going to do it differently next time. And often that will manifest into procrastination and delaying tactics, attention, I can't get started' (Penny, staff, School B)

Difficulty getting started with independent tasks was noted by several teachers. Teachers Emily and Steph (School A) addressed this directly by developing specific strategies to support their case study students at the moment of transition from whole class to individual work. This helped their case study students to remain focused instead of disengaging and exhibiting behaviour problems at these points of the lesson and thereby helped strengthen learner identity in that subject.

For other students, a fragile learner identity is manifest internally, through withdrawal or passivity. These students are often less noticeable, as with this case study student:

'she doesn't participate in any discussions.... when I asked her in front of the rest of the group she shook her head as if to say 'don't ask me' which was interesting, she just doesn't want to talk in front of anyone.....I think it's a

confidence thing with her, she hasn't got much confidence.... she struggles with being out of her comfort zone' (Debbie, staff, School C)

Reluctance to answer questions, low confidence, not wanting to be out of a 'comfort zone' were mentioned frequently by teachers in relation to their case study students. These behaviours were also observed during days of tracking and talked about by students. Michael says this about his dislike of being in the struggle zone:

'The stuff that I enjoy to do motivates me more and the stuff that's harder it just makes me not want to do it cos I don't understand most of the stuff' (Michael, student, School B)

In the few subjects he enjoys (business studies, IT and PE) Michael demonstrates resilience but in other subjects he has a tendency to give up unless handled skilfully by the teacher. His lack of resourcefulness in the face of difficulty is typical of students who exhibit low resilience. He says:

'You know you can try harder but you just don't know how and what to do to get along' (Michael, student, School B)

He has a vague sense that he could 'try harder' but lacks strategies. This is in contrast to Daisy, a student with a mostly strong learner identity who says this about how she handles difficulty:

'I try and do it. If I can't do it then I'll ask for help. And then go from there' (Daisy, student, School C)

This is a resourceful attitude which was observed in action. As one teacher said, Daisy is a good communicator who will ask for help before it becomes a problem thereby using social capital to strengthen learner identity. 'go from there' includes reference to class notes or a textbook, looking things up on the internet or talking to a friend or teacher. Such resourcefulness, confidence and readiness to ask for help are supported by social capital and were not observed in or spoken about by students who exhibited a fragile learner identity.

Passivity is much less noticeable to teachers than misbehaviour but is just as much of a barrier to effective learning. Indeed, a member of staff at School B noted that a minority of white working-class students present significant behaviour problems. The majority who underachieve do so in a quietly disengaged manner. Mandy at School A talked about problems with *'zoning out'* in some lessons whilst Linda noticed that she has difficulty in getting things to *'stick in my brain'*. Neither student draws attention to themselves through their behaviour, but effective learning is not taking place. Internal manifestations of a fragile learner identity are therefore just as important to attend to as the more obvious external manifestations.

The 13 tracked students in this study ranged along the continuum. However, there were many more who exhibited and/or talked about a fragile learner identity across the majority of their subjects. Indeed, three (Ben, Billy and Katie) could be regarded as having a fragile learner identity in all but one subject whilst seven had two or three areas of strength but otherwise evidenced a fragile learner identity. Only three students (Mandy, Liam and Daisy) could be regarded as having a generally strong learner identity, with just one or two areas of weakness.

All 16 of the focus group teachers' case study students could be said to have a fragile learner identity. Two of these were also tracked students (Katie and Leanne) and this teacher perception was corroborated by observation and the students' comments. The reasons for the prevalence of a learner identity made fragile in white working-class students are complex and will be discussed in the conclusion of this chapter and returned to in the next.

What happens in the classroom

As one might expect, what happens in the classroom makes a difference to a student's learner identity. There were several examples of students who identified a change in teacher as critical to their feelings about a subject and their ability to do it. Here Carol talks about how her view of English is beginning to change because of a new teacher:

'well I don't really like English cos I kinda struggle in it... it's alright but I don't really do good in English because I don't like reading and I don't like writing. But now that I'm getting good at it, I'm kinda trying to like it because in primary I didn't like it at all' (Carol, student, School C)

Carol's primary school experiences in English contributed towards a fragile learner identity in this subject. This continued for most of year 7, during which time she had a teacher who she felt discounted her along with her white working-class friendship group to the extent that she complained to the head of year about his attitude towards them. She positions her new, current teacher in contrast to the old teacher:

'She don't just pick on one person to read she lets the whole class. But with our old teacher he just picked on one person and then there was a group of us, and we used to get, on but he never ever picked us like ever. And then we just didn't bother no more. And then now that we're all in our new classes we like it' (Carol, student, School C)

Carol feels she was systematically ignored by her old teacher in a way which triggered disengagement. However, for the final half term of year 7 she has a different English teacher, who I observed. This teacher is attentive to individuals and supports the development of academically supportive social capital through meaningful group work. She creates a classroom culture in which mistakes are overtly valued as part of the learning process, strategies such as note taking are modelled explicitly and students' capitals are recognised through the validation of their ideas and responses. Carol's sense that she is now *'getting good at it'* and *'kinda trying to like it'* is linked to this new teacher. A mixture of pedagogical expertise and attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning enables this teacher to strengthen Carol's learner identity in English.

The importance of felt safety

Student comments and observation suggest that a common feature of such teachers is that they make the classroom feel safe; something which is particularly important

for students who may experience a mismatch between home and school habitus. These teachers create an atmosphere where understanding is treated as a shared endeavour and students feel safe to ask questions and say they don't understand. Such teachers give clear explanations and examples, check for understanding (often on an individual basis), clear up misconceptions and explain further or offer alternative explanations where necessary. This is often accompanied by a sense that the teacher cares about the student and their understanding, as discussed in the previous chapter on relationships.

There were teachers in all three schools who created this level of safety in their classrooms, as demonstrated in the two quotations which follow. In the first Poppy talks about her English teacher Steph, who was also a focus group teacher:

'with other lessons they would just be like 'you've got to do this' but she stops at points and she explains what it actually means and she gets in role as the characters sometimes and then she would go around and make sure that everyone actually understands what they're doing' (Poppy, student, School A)

Although Poppy is dyslexic, English is one of her favourite lessons. Observation reinforces Poppy's claim that Steph is careful to check understanding and provide support where needed. She creates a calm and nurturing atmosphere in which students are encouraged to make links between their lives and the topic of the lesson so that it feels meaningful; a bridge between home and school habitus. Students are supported to be resourceful and to help each other (thereby building academically supportive social capital) and specific praise is used to develop the behaviours for learning often cultivated through a middle-class habitus. Despite writing slowly and with effort, Poppy is happy to write in both English and other curriculum subjects; once clear about what she had to do, she settled to writing activities and, in several lessons, continued whilst others were packing away in order to complete the task. It is difficult to attribute cause, but it may be that the confidence which Steph's approach has given Poppy in English supports her sense of self as a competent writer in other subjects.

In the second quotation below, Michael talks about his current maths teacher, who he sees as the best of the three which he has had over the last two years.

'I like the teacher. He explains it well and does a lot of examples so that when he makes us do work, we know the general idea' (Michael, student, School B)

Clear explanations and modelling support Michael's understanding. However, his prefacing comment is as important as these sound pedagogical aspects: *'I like the teacher'*. In the lesson I observed Michael put up his hand twice to ask a clarifying question. The teacher came over to him quickly and provided the necessary support. Although Michael finds maths difficult and does not enjoy it, a combination of pedagogical skill and strong relationship enable him to persevere and experience success; something he struggles to do in several other subjects.

As illustrated, individual teachers in all three schools provide a safe classroom space which strengthens students' learner identities in their subjects. However, school-wide policies and approaches do influence how teachers operate and therefore how students feel about school. School A and B have a more authoritarian institutional habitus where there is greater value placed on silent classrooms and discipline than at School C. School B explicitly interprets Rosenshine's principles of instruction to emphasise the teacher as knowledge bearer, characterised by one teacher as *'a sort of lecture style for kids'* (Sam, teacher, School B). Students from these two schools talked more about problems with asking questions than those at School C. Michael's comment below is typical:

'If you want to try and ask a question, certain teachers will just say 'put your hand down'. So say if I waited until they finish, put it up again, they still say put it down. So you can't really ask what you want to ask. So you can't really move ahead' (Michael, student, School B)

Here he presents not being able to ask a question as a barrier to progress. Although he has tried to be sensitive to the appropriate time to ask a question, he is still denied and thus frustrated and disempowered. I witnessed the importance of Michael being able to ask clarifying questions in maths, but *'certain teachers'* are not

so open, perhaps influenced by an institutional habitus which places greater emphasis on discipline than the development of student agency. This affects Michael's ability to progress in those subjects.

Mandy from School A goes further in her analysis of the effect on her engagement:

'I'm told to put my hand up more but then I put my hand up and I don't get answered or if they do they get annoyed because I don't understand it and they said that they've already explained it when I obviously still don't understand it. And then I end up, just [sighs] it just doesn't help me learn. If they have that attitude when I have my hand up it's not going to want to make me put my hand up more, it's going to make me just sit there and do nothing'
(Mandy, student, School A)

This quotation both makes and collapses the distinction between putting up your hand to answer and ask a question. The injunction *'to put up my hand more'* is typical of a teacher at a progress review meeting and refers to answering questions; a behaviour which white working-class students in this study tended to avoid. For Mandy, the way in which she is discouraged from asking questions transfers to her feelings about answering questions. Common to both is the notion of understanding; questions are asked of students to check and extend understanding and students ask questions from curiosity or to seek clarification. Mandy feels that her understanding is neglected in the current set up and that her desire to improve her understanding elicits annoyance from the teacher. There is an imbalance of power and agency: Mandy is expected to answer questions but not to ask them. It is ironic that students are often presented as having *'attitude'* but here Mandy identifies the *'attitude'* of the teacher as key to her disengagement. If a student feels that their questions are not welcome by the teacher, they are less likely to respond positively to the teachers' questions.

This attitude to students' questions is congruent with 'pedagogies of poverty' in which student agency and voice is minimised. Both Michael and Mandy attempt to gain agency. However, the rebuttal of their efforts compounds an already disadvantaged field position and reduces their ability to successfully navigate the

learning environment. Mandy has a reasonably strong learner identity and gets on as well as she can, despite feeling frustrated and demotivated. However, not feeling safe to ask questions and admit to not understanding is seriously detrimental to engagement and progress for students with a more fragile learner identity. This is illustrated by Linda in the case study below.

Case study: Linda

Linda is a year 10 student who has found it difficult to make friends and suffers from social isolation and related lack of social capital. This is the main reason for her frequent absences; peer dynamics make her feel *'miserable'*. Linda's learner identity is heavily influenced by relationships with teachers and peers, which affect how safe she feels in lessons.

For Linda, difficulty asking questions is linked to fear of looking *'dumb'* and drawing attention to herself. Teachers whose classrooms exacerbate this fear have a profound effect on her sense of herself as a learner. She says:

'some students, cos they feel like they keep asking too many questions, they won't want to put their hand up after say they've got to a certain limit, because they feel like the teacher's gonna think they're dumb and stuff and that's going to be in front of the whole class' (Linda, student, School A)

This was said in a focus group, in front of four peers. In this context, Linda protects herself by using the third person to explain the process of self-censorship and behaviour adjustment triggered by fear of judgement from teacher and peers. However, she is more candid when talking on a one-to-one basis.

I observed a maths lesson in which the teacher asked students to put their thumbs up or down to indicate whether they understood. Linda put her thumbs down however the teacher ignored this signal and moved on to the next question. When we unpicked this moment in the one-to-one interview it was apparent that Linda felt purposely ignored: *'he looked at me, he saw my thumb, I saw him look at me'*. When

asked how this made her feel she was quiet for a few seconds then said: *'it felt like I'm not getting any help'*. Before this, the teacher had encouraged students to ask questions to clarify their understanding, but Linda had not. When asked why, she responded: *'he probably would have just said like, you've missed a lot'*.

Her maths teacher blames her lack of understanding on her absences and makes her feel judged so that she neither asks questions in class nor seeks additional help outside lessons. This is in contrast to her science teacher, who is also her tutor and with whom she has a good relationship. I observed the science teacher skilfully use peer coaching to catch her up with what she had missed and thereby also create an opportunity for social interaction, which prompted Linda to smile. Linda feels she can go to her science teacher for extra help outside lessons; there is a warmth to their interactions which enables Linda to feel comfortable and develops social capital.

The maths teacher used several pedagogical techniques which are currently regarded as good practice: he encouraged students to ask questions and used a visual indicator to assess whether the class were ready to move on. However, neither were effective for Linda because his interactions with her do not enable her to feel safe to say she does not understand. For her, maths lessons are associated with feeling confused, judged and ignored which all contribute to a weak learner identity in this subject. What happens in the classroom makes Linda feel this way because of the how the relationship with the teacher influences her interaction with his pedagogy, rather than the pedagogy alone.

Linda's absence is dealt with differently by her maths and science teacher which contribute to very different feelings about these subjects and her ability to understand them. For Linda, a fragile learner identity is manifest through withdrawal: she doesn't ask questions, seek extra help, or interact with her peers unless supported to do so. For Leanne, the manifestation is opposite: she asks questions and seeks teacher affirmation and peer attention at every opportunity. This is dealt with differently by different teachers, which affects her attitude to learning in those subjects. It thus again exemplifies that what happens in the classroom has a significant effect on a student's learner identity.

In English, her teacher Steph has made an agreement whereby Leanne is allowed to ask five questions during each lesson and is encouraged to think about if she really needs help to support her to become more judicious in her demands. They also have an arrangement whereby Leanne tries by herself for a few minutes before asking for help; the number of minutes has gradually increased over the weeks. English is one of Leanne's favourite subjects and she has a strong learner identity in it. Although Steph says that her written work is often rushed and functional, she is careful to nurture Leanne's sense of her skills and confidence. However, Leanne expresses a dislike of maths and her maths teacher. This report of his response to her excessive questions is corroborated by other pupils in the focus group:

'once he wrote on the board "the next time Leanne says I don't understand or puts her hand up she will get a 5 minute detention for every time she does it" (Leanne, student, School A)

I observed Leanne in a maths lesson with this teacher who was indeed sarcastic and dismissive in his attitude to her need for reassurance. Although Leanne is reasonably capable in maths (according to her set allocation and a comment by the head of maths), her confidence and resourcefulness are not nurtured by this teacher's pedagogy or his relationship with her. The same student behaviour, dealt with very differently, therefore has a direct impact on the student's feelings about herself as a learner in these subjects.

Questions, both from and to the teacher, are a critical part of learning. The feedback a teacher gives a student is similarly important and again impacts the levels of safety a student feels in a class. Mandy articulates how differences in the way feedback is given affects how a student feels:

'one teacher that I have, she would say, if you've got a bad grade, don't beat yourself up about it. There's always the next test and it doesn't go to anything. It's just to see where we are and how to help you. That is better because it helps you, it will push you to do better. Instead of them saying 'oh we expect more from you' - they put it in a way that you're not good enough so you have

to be better. Saying we'll find different ways to revise or we'll give you extra help or something helps more than just saying well that's your problem you need to fix it' (Mandy, student, School A)

The feedback which is helpful is framed in a supportive way; the test is presented as formative, providing useful information about how teacher and pupil need to work together to improve. This is motivational (*'it will push you to do better'*) and develops student agency. However, the unhelpful form presents the student as in deficit (*'you're not good enough'*) and sees underachievement as a *'problem'* belonging to the student which they are responsible for fixing thereby ignoring the structuring force of experience on learner identity. This conveys the individualistic emphasis of neoliberalism; it is a micro-moment in which students absorb the sense that failure is an individual responsibility, not the result of structural inequalities which make it easier for some to achieve than others.

The impact of ability grouping (setting) on felt safety

The 'Best practice in grouping students' study (Francis et al, 2019) found a clear correlation between confidence and set, with students in low sets making less academic progress and feeling progressively less confident about their abilities. Katie, a student in School C with a fragile learner identity, says *'I think I'm stupid..... I was born dumb'* and gives her placement in low sets as evidence. Like Bourdieu's notion that habitus is both structuring and structured by, this grouping practice both creates and is the result of labelling. When asked if she feels like this in the outside world, Katie responds *'[it's] just something I feel at school'*; there is a mismatch between the way that capitals are valued at home and school. However, feeling *'stupid'* at school leads to placement in low sets which in turn reinforces a fragile learner identity which is likely to have implications for Katie's life prospects beyond school.

Not only does the attribution of a low set label a student as *'stupid'* but the higher concentration of behaviour problems in these groups makes it difficult to teach and learn effectively, which further erodes students' sense of themselves as learners. The science teacher of a low set in school B said of her case study student:

'with a set like that it's very easy for someone like Fred to be completely hidden and to be missed, because there are so many other characters in the class...someone like Fred, if I never looked at him, quite easily, his book would be empty and nobody would notice' (Sofia, staff, School B)

Fred is a usually quiet and passive student who is easily missed in the challenging context of a low set: his lack of work and learning go unnoticed because the teacher is preoccupied by other more attention seeking students. However, an uncharacteristic explosion one day illustrates that underneath the peaceable exterior of a student with an internally manifest fragile learner identity may be a depth of dissatisfaction and anger.

'I asked him to come and sit at the front, and he just sort of said "what for?" so I said "don't question me, just do it and if you don't do it you know what the consequences are" and so he started mumbling and muttering so I said "alright you need to stop right there" and so I pressed the button to have him removed from the class. And then there was just this tirade of "oh you're not even teaching us, you don't even care, you're not interested, you're this, you're that, de de de der" and I think everyone was sort of "ooh what's this, this is Fred speaking up" which is nev... So then he became more and more agitated and started kicking furniture' (Sofia, staff, School B)

In this outburst Fred conveys his frustration with an unsatisfactory learning environment and a behaviour policy which demands passive obedience rather than dialogue. He does not understand why he has been asked to move but his questioning is met with threat and ultimately the pressing of a button to summon removal – a form of symbolic violence which removes student agency and exerts institutional power. His impression that the teacher does not care and is not interested in the students is part of his upset, which is congruent with the importance of student-teacher relationships analysed in the previous chapter. Students placed in low sets often travel from lesson to lesson together, facilitating the development of oppositional social capital and exacerbating negative group dynamics which only the most skilful teacher can manage. It is very difficult for students' skills and sense of

themselves as learners to be strengthened in such circumstances. This disproportionately affects working-class students who are overrepresented in lower sets (Francis et al, 2019).

However, familiarity (being in a comfort zone) can also make it difficult to leave. I observed Billy (a student with a fragile learner identity in School B) in a bottom set maths class where the teacher shouted and threatened throughout, but never at Billy. He was the 'golden boy' of the group and got on with his work in a more focused way than in any other lesson. The teacher said that Billy should be in one or two sets above and that his understanding and performance was well ahead. Billy said that he didn't like the set above (where I had observed him be ignored the previous term) and had purposely wrongly answered assessment questions to move back down. This illustrates the importance of felt safety; Billy preferred to be in a low set where the work was within his comfort zone and he won approval from the teacher: a rare opportunity for him to occupy the role of an intelligible learner. It is also an example of a student valuing a relationship with a teacher over pedagogy: the teacher was not able to teach effectively but his interactions with Billy were calm and full of praise such that Billy preferred to stay with him than be in a more conducive learning environment with a teacher who ignored him.

The structure of sets means that Billy's progress is likely to be limited because of the pace of learning in the bottom set. This would not be the case in a mixed attainment group. A similar logic applies at the opposite end of the attainment and learner identity spectrum with Daisy in School C. In most lessons, Daisy evidences a strong learner identity. However, her experiences of maths have made this aspect of her learner identity more fragile. In year 7 her learner identity in maths was strengthened by a particularly good teacher who enabled her to enjoy the subject and make good progress:

'I think year 7 was the only year that I actually enjoyed maths because we had Ms X and she was the best maths teacher' (Daisy, student, School C)

However, the system of setting means that she is now at the bottom of a higher set where she feels inadequate and confused.

'then I moved up a set, towards the end of year 9, and that's when I was like nah I can't do maths anymore cos I moved up a set. So I'm trying to get back down' (Daisy, student, School C)

The class move on before she is ready and she feels frustrated. Her sense that she *'can't do maths anymore'* is directly linked to the experience of moving up. Her attempts to *'get back down'* are in earnest: she has enlisted her mother's support and spoken to the maths department. Both Daisy and Billy prefer being at the top of a lower set than at the bottom of a higher set. What Daisy is trying to do through official routes is the same as Billy did covertly, through intentionally failing his assessment; students' navigation of the field of school is linked to how they feel about themselves as a learner and the range of capitals at their disposal. In general, Daisy is in a strong position as an intelligible learner with social capital aligned to institutional values so can act within the system, whereas Billy's learner identity has been made fragile by unmet learning needs, he has less institutionally sanctioned capital and therefore uses subterfuge to achieve the same end.

In contrast, mixed attainment grouping allows greater fluidity for students to progress without grappling with the psychological and emotional challenges of set changes and the disruption to relationships with teachers, peers and learning environment that this involves. In School C the setting system in maths is an anomaly; almost all other subjects are taught in mixed attainment groups. However, in School B setting is the norm and part of an institutional habitus which prioritises the efficiency of systems over the needs of individuals. This has implications for students' levels of felt safety. Such a habitus also impacts students' capacity to take responsibility for their learning, which is the focus of the next section.

The role of responsibility

The notion of responsibility is complicated by paradoxical forces within the current neoliberal system. Performance pressure leads schools to function like factories (Hutchings, 2015), churning out results, often by spoon-feeding (and sometimes force-feeding) which leaves little room for student agency. Yet the myth of

meritocracy emphasises individual culpability (Reay, 2017). Students are required to take responsibility for something which is often taken out of their hands. To some extent this echoes the plight that schools are in themselves: bombarded by accountability measures, policies and initiatives and yet vulnerable to blame and judgement. Students and schools are subjects of an incapacitating system but judged as if they were impervious to its forces; structured by a system which both holds them to account and undermines their agency.

The previous section of this chapter explored how felt safety can impact learner identity. Motivation and responsibility also have an important role to play in learner identity and will be the focus of this section. As a student (not part of this study) once explained, successful teaching and learning is like a bridge built by teacher and student where both must build their half to meet in the middle. Without effort on the part of the student, learning is limited.

What happens in the classroom affects motivation and the student's capacity to take responsibility for learning. This research found that the following are particularly important. Each will be discussed in a separate section below: ensuring students are *active* in their learning; enabling students to be *resourceful*; and student *interest*. All require space to let the student be responsible and have agency and yet there are forces within the system which oppose this. As with safety, the student-teacher relationship is vital; pedagogy alone is not enough. Institutional habitus is also influential in the way it shapes and sometimes limits what teachers can do in their classrooms and dictates how students spend their time in terms of curriculum, intervention and extra-curricular activities.

Active learning

The bridge analogy above draws attention to the importance of the student being active, building their half of the bridge, for effective learning to take place. This was demonstrated in all three research schools. However, if students neither put up their hand to ask or answer questions, their level of active engagement can be significantly reduced. When asked what teachers could do to help him to engage, Johnny replied that they could make lessons more interactive. I pointed out that his

Spanish lesson had been very interactive for the handful of students who answered questions and volunteered contributions. He thought for a moment and conceded that I had a point. Here the fault lies not with Johnny but with pedagogies which don't demand that students do their share of cognitive work and a habitus which encourages passivity.

Billy summarises a common issue:

'If I'm not doing something, I'll get bored' (Billy, student, School B)

This was borne out by observation. When Billy is bored, he misbehaves in an effort to find something to do (an external manifestation). Others, like Mandy, 'zone out' (an internal manifestation):

'sometimes I'll be thinking I'm paying attention and then when it comes to the work, I'll realise I wasn't, I was zoned out. I'll be looking at the teacher, it's not like I'll have my head on the desk, but it just won't go in' (Mandy, student, School A)

Mandy appears to be listening but is not taking in any information or learning in that moment which then makes it difficult for her to get on with the independent work which follows. This tends to happen when the teacher talks for too long or engages in dialogue with only a few members of the class, as in Johnny's Spanish lesson. A boy in a KS3 focus group said this when asked what teachers do which get in the way of learning:

'A lot of them just go too in depth and they end up just giving you the answer without even noticing so they just do it themselves and they don't leave anything to you' (KS3 student, School B)

This is in line with School B's instructional approach to teaching in which the teacher imparts knowledge to students. Here the teacher is presented as 'hogging the air space' with students as passive recipients of answers, deprived of their share of activity. There are teachers in this school who do not see the value of students

speaking or discussing and this seems to be condoned or perhaps produced by the favoured instructional style. Sam says, without irony or self-consciousness:

'I try and discourage [discussion] really because you can't talk your way to a correct fact' (Sam, staff, School B)

When I raise the importance of students articulating ideas and engaging in dialogue to a senior leader responsible for teaching and learning, he acknowledges that a lot of research supports this approach. However, he says that the school is committed to predominantly silent lessons because it is more efficient in their context and there is too much risk of problematic and off task behaviour when students are given space to talk.

In School B, student behaviour is constantly contained. During one day of tracking, the threat of internal exclusion was used in every lesson to motivate students to behave as the teacher wanted. Students are expected to be silent in lessons unless answering questions posed by the teacher. Pair or group work occurs in lessons such as music, drama, food technology, MFL, practical science lessons and PE but for the most part students are required to work individually, in silence. The comprehensive system of internal exclusion and subsequent detention works effectively to deal with any deviation.

There is also a comprehensive assessment and tracking system which enables managers to see exactly where students are in terms of progress and attainment. This informs movement between sets and in KS4, determines each student's intervention schedule. The result is a reasonably orderly atmosphere with largely obedient students and good exam results. However, there are significant issues with intrinsic motivation, which affect how students feel about themselves as learners. The school is caught in a vicious cycle: students are not encouraged to talk because of fear of misbehaviour but passivity gives rise to misbehaviour which then must be quelled through discipline, which reinforces the sense that more active learning would be risky.

Of 52 lessons I observed at School B, there were only three in which students were on task without coercion throughout the lesson and could have been said to be in 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In the student interview at the end of these days, the three lessons were all identified as enjoyable. The lessons had these characteristics in common: the students were active and did their share of cognitive work; the teacher encouraged the students to be resourceful; the teachers made links between the learning and the students' experiences (thus building a bridge between home and institutional habitus and validating capitals); the teachers were enthusiastic and treated the students with calm respect. One of the lessons was a KS4 IT lesson about which Michael says:

[The teacher] sends a message to our computers and it shows steps how to do stuff, so I think that helps out a lot with our coursework...I think he's very enthusiastic, I think he enjoys the subject so I think it motivates us to work hard as well...whenever you have a problem, he straightaway comes, shows us what to do, what we need to do ahead of that as well so we can just get on with the work (Michael, student, School B)

Here Michael identifies several attributes which were discussed in the previous section on safety: clear explanations, modelling, feedback, and timely one to one support. He explicitly mentions motivation and links this to the teacher's attitude to the subject. Twice he speaks of himself as active: 'work hard' and 'just get on with the work'. There was a poster in the room about respecting each other because teachers and students are sharing the space for the same reasons. This sense of respect and shared endeavour was pervasive. The teacher used a student's work to illustrate feedback; he shared another student's high grade to demonstrate progress made through putting in effort; he 'straightaway comes' to help individuals; students helped each other. Towards the end of the lesson the teacher reminded them that he is available after school and on Saturdays and students were keen to be acknowledged as part of this (non-compulsory) group. It is socially acceptable to succeed and to work hard in this subject where students have the space and support to take responsibility for their learning and can develop academically supportive social capital.

The other two lessons where students were in flow was a KS3 resistant materials lesson and a KS3 history lesson. This range demonstrates that it is possible for pupils in this school to actively engage in KS3 and KS4 and in both practical lessons and those which are more reliant on reading and writing. However, these were the exceptions, made possible by particularly skilful teachers. In most lessons there was an atmosphere of containment in which pupils were focused and behaving well because of power exerted by the teacher and school systems, rather than because of student volition.

In Schools A and C students seemed to be more motivated and engaged in their learning and there were very few occasions on which threats were used to modify behaviour. Active learning is part of the discourse in School C, as seen in the quote below:

'If you walk around classrooms, the vast majority of times you see really good student focus and student learning. They're not passive learners, they are most of them, most of the time, active in their learning' (staff, School C)

The school runs a popular (but not compulsory) annual professional development course for teachers which includes pedagogic strategies to ensure that students are doing their share of cognitive work, for example hands down questioning (also known as cold calling). This strategy removes the problem of the lesson being dominated by a few keen students with others able to hide unnoticed. This member of staff is careful to qualify her claim with *'most of them'* and *'most of the time'*. She knows that there are still issues with some students (including several who participated in the research) and that not all teachers are equally skilful, but she clearly equates being active with engagement and learning.

The focus group teachers in all three schools noticed that giving their case study students small responsibilities and opportunities to physically move around helped with engagement. This strategy works for several reasons: it strengthens the student-teacher relationship and thus builds social capital; it enables the student to feel seen and valued; it provides a movement break and something to do; students like the sense of responsibility and agency. Below is a quote from each school:

'my other tactic with her is having her right at the front and often, 'will you help me hand out the books, will you help me collect them in because you do it so neatly, will you'. She's like my helper and has responsibility, so that's also been helpful.' (Annie, staff, School A)

'He's super willing to do little jobs, probably because of that practical aspect, likes to be up and doing things so I try to utilise him as much as possible with things like handing out the glues, mini whiteboards, he's always really keen to do that. It's really helpful' (Penny, staff, School B)

'sometimes she's been a sticker monitor and she likes doing that and that's a diversion... it takes her off whatever's happened outside, the positive of 'I've got a job to do, I'm helping Miss'. She likes doing that kind of thing' (Moir, staff, School C)

All three quotes draw attention to the positive sense of self that these tasks give the students: Annie's student is chosen because she is good at it; Penny's student is 'really helpful'; the task takes Moira's student away from peer issues and refocuses her on positive activity. These are all practical, menial jobs but may provide a clue to what is sometimes missing from the way that academic or cognitive work is presented: responsibility; a level of autonomy; bodily interaction; evident usefulness.

Students in all three schools expressed a preference for practical subjects: PE; food technology; resistant materials; practical science lessons; textiles; drama; music; IT. Carol's comment is just one example:

'I like making stuff because I'm very creative. I like it when I make stuff so like textiles... you go on the sewing machine. We made a pillow last year' (Carol, student, School C)

It is important not to reinforce the stereotype that the working class do better with vocational and the middle-class with academic subjects or that the working class like working with their hands. This is simplistic and misses patterns constructed by the

history of employment and education; the habitus of working-class lives has historically been dominated by physical labour which may make it feel more natural or appealing but does not mean that they cannot engage equally well with cerebral work; the habitus of education has been dominated by reading and writing and the paradigm of student as passive recipient but that does not mean that learning has to take place behind a desk mostly in silence. Indeed, study of Shakespeare is seen as a kitemark of academic English but education workshops by organisations such as the RSC and Globe constantly emphasise physical and active engagement with the text (Gibson, 2016; John Yandell, Coles, & Bryer, 2020).

If students are active in their learning, through talk, thought, bodily movement (including writing), being resourceful and having agency there is greater capacity for them to have a positive sense of themselves as learners (as they have of themselves as teachers' helpers) and thereby engage and achieve more effectively. This does not have to be the preserve of subjects which are practical by nature.

Being resourceful

One of the problems of the silent classroom is the way in which it reduces students to dependency on the teacher. It prevents them from being resources for each other even though students' learner identities are strengthened by both seeking and providing peer support, thus building academically supportive social capital. The power of peer support was seen in a science lesson in School C. Gemma says this of her teacher:

'he's a good teacher but also he don't take nothing, like he won't take people being naughty and stuff like that, so he's strict but he's a good teacher...he says if you're stuck, ask the person next to you for help, if not, ask the other side of you and if you're really stuck then talk to him' (Gemma, student, School C)

This was a lesson where students were in flow even though the activity was revision which can be difficult to make engaging. Students worked quietly and helped each other freely whilst the teacher circulated. The teacher's meta-talk emphasised the

value of students being resourceful, just as Gemma said. In the quote below he frames difficulty as positive because it prompts students to find strategies which will help when there is no one to ask:

'if you get stuck that's a good thing because you figure it out. That's what you can do in the exam' (teacher, School C)

Gemma was right when she commented *'he don't take nothing'*. He was alert to off task talk and on the two occasions it occurred he calmly and effectively re-directed students. I watched one student (not in the study) who had presented challenging behaviour in two other lessons that day. In this lesson she worked with complete focus, including at one point leaving her seat to seek help from another student and returning immediately she had the relevant information. This freedom to move around in a responsible way was also seen in Michael's IT lesson in School B. In both cases the teacher was alert to students taking advantage, but the students demonstrated that the trust afforded them was well placed.

Being able to help someone else reinforces learning and builds academically supportive social capital, thereby strengthening learner identity. Although Leanne says that she is usually the one to ask for help, on this occasion she was proud to be able to explain something to her neighbours and clear about the way it benefitted her own learning:

'it helped me a bit more for next time so I can remember it because I've already helped people to do it' (Leanne, student, School A)

Sometimes it is easier to understand something from a peer than a teacher. Mandy was one of several students who said she found peer support helpful:

'If I don't want to put my hand up, I can usually ask [my partner] for help cos sometimes she can explain it better' (Mandy, student, School A)

Mandy does not feel comfortable to ask the teacher (perhaps because of the safety issues discussed in the previous section) but the problem is solved by being able to ask a partner. If the class is silent, this is not possible:

'in the classes where I have to be silent, they're the ones I hate the most because if I need help I can't talk to anyone' (KS4 student, School A)

This comment is laced with language of coercion (*'have to be'*), anti-school feeling (*'hate'*) and helplessness (*'I can't'*): the opposite of a resourceful, motivated learner. Asking the teacher for help during a silent lesson can also be off putting. Linda, with her social anxiety, is keen to avoid drawing attention to herself:

'when the class is all quiet I don't really ask' (Linda, student, School A)

As an isolated student, Linda's only engagement with her peers was when told to work in a pair by a teacher. This didn't happen very often but when it did, she enjoyed it. A KS3 focus group student commented explicitly on the social benefits of pair work:

'Sometimes when you work in pairs it's better than working independently because instead of one brain you have two brains.....it's much more better because you get to have a better relationship with your friends as well' (Carl, student, School B)

Given that this research found that peer relationships have a significant impact on engagement and achievement, the opportunity to work collaboratively towards a shared academic outcome (thereby building academically supportive social capital) is valuable. It can help students to flourish socially and academically and reduce a tendency to set up a social identity in opposition to school.

Being resourceful also means being able to work independently. Teachers and students at all three schools talked about difficulties with independent study. Teachers reported that white British FSM students often did not complete homework or revise. This was supported by students' comments. The students who did

regularly complete homework were those with stronger learner identities and/or mothers who ensured that it was done. Even then, according to some parents, it is often rushed.

Mandy has a reasonably strong learner identity and is supported at home to complete homework. However, she struggles to revise as much as she could because she is not confident about the strategies:

'revision is difficult because I haven't worked out how to revise efficiently, so I can actually get it into my brain. I get good grades, even though I don't revise as much as I should, because whenever I do revise I either zone out or it just doesn't work cos it's not efficient' (Mandy, student, School A)

As she acknowledges, she gets good grades but could get higher if she knew how to revise effectively. She is insightful enough to notice and be bothered that her efforts are *'not efficient'*. This is experienced as a demotivating force.

For other students, such as Leanne, Billy and Ben, work outside school is simply not part of their habitus: there is no physical or temporal space for it. Leanne's comment is typical:

'I was out with my cousins in the half term, so I didn't really revise' (Leanne, student, School A).

Her performance in end of year 7 exams thus relies on what she has retained from lessons and a last-minute flick through her exercise book. For students to work successfully outside the classroom they need opportunities to practice being resourceful in lessons, opportunities to develop meaningful strategies and in some cases a supportive space in school where they can get help, as offered by Michael's IT teacher. It also helps if they are interested in the subject.

Interest

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, it was noticed that students with learner identities which have been made fragile by experience are more dependent on interest, whereas those whose learner identities have been strengthened tend to be more able to apply themselves even in subjects which they do not find inherently interesting. Michael says:

'If a teacher's doing something that I enjoy, I wanna learn it more, cos then if I enjoy doing it, I'll learn it. But if it's just a really boring subject, it's just like I don't wanna do this' (Michael, student, School B)

Michael finds it difficult to be in the struggle zone of learning. If he enjoys and is interested in a subject, such as IT or business studies, he is motivated to apply himself and can withstand a degree of challenge. If he is not interested, he requires a careful combination of safety, support and active learning, as provided by his maths teacher. The link between interest, motivation and learning was emphasised by several students. As Ben says: *'[you] learn more, cos you're more interested'* (Ben, student, School B).

A skilful teacher can enhance a student's interest in a subject. However, everyone has some subjects they are more inherently interested in than others, whether these interests are socially constructed or innate. As already noted, the white working-class students interviewed tended to express a preference for practical or vocational subjects which involved physical interaction or practical application, although subjects such as sociology and history were also cited as favourites. However, the curriculum in all three schools is skewed heavily towards academic subjects which have greater institutional capital. Practical or vocational subjects are either allocated a small amount of curriculum time (such as one term of art in year 7 in School A), available as limited GCSE options, or absent.

In both schools A and C teachers spoke about the lack of vocational GCSE subjects and the impact on students who were not thriving academically:

'quite a lot of girls in the school who are underachieving [it] would definitely help them if they had access to other subjects' (Hazera, staff, School C)

The certainty expressed by this teacher was supported by others who lamented the curtailment of vocational subjects which happened as a result of Gove's agenda.

Even within the constraints of the current curriculum, however, student interest can be increased through choice which gives a sense of agency. Moira makes this comment about her case study student:

'she likes doing speaking, more active things, as most of the girls do.....[she] also responds well to choice: in common with a lot of the girls being given a choice of activities rather than me imposing activities on her. When she asked if she could choose an activity and I said yes she was fine just getting on with it' (Moira, staff, School C)

Here she suggests that active learning and choice lead to better engagement for many students, including her case study student who exhibits a fragile learner identity. Motivation to complete a task is noticeably increased by the student being able to follow their interest and choose from a range of activities rather than the teacher *'imposing'* one.

Creative tasks can also provide space for student agency, as well as afford opportunities for students to be seen and responded to as individuals, thereby validating symbolic capitals, building social capital and strengthening learner identity. However, the ways in which exam preparation dominates curriculum and pedagogy affects how subjects are constituted. Creative responses have value for both processes of learning and assessment (Bomford, 2022) but are squeezed out, even from subjects which could have wide appeal such as English. Forms required by the exam (such as the critical essay) are privileged and creativity is relegated to bottom sets despite its potential to increase engagement.

Johnny's preference for being in the bottom English set is because of the greater opportunities for creative expression:

'When I was in the bottom set I actually enjoyed the work more because it allowed us to express ourselves more cos what we was doing, we was basically doing a bunch of creative writing. It was really fun. I enjoyed it'
(Johnny, student, School B)

As explained above, there is often a link between interest, enjoyment, progress and learner identity. Here's Johnny's sense of himself as a writer and willingness to engage in English is strengthened by activities which allow him creative space and self-expression. Unfortunately, these were lost when he moved up a set, into a type of English lesson he disliked.

Interest and consequent enjoyment can also strengthen learner identity in extra-curricular activities which often do not have the pressure of a curriculum subject, are freer in delivery style and voluntary. However, teachers at all three schools talked about the low take up of extra-curricular activities by white working-class students, despite the positive impact that it would potentially have. When asked, students cited reluctance to stay after the end of the school day and a lack of activities during lunch breaks. The former can be linked to social identity and habitus and will be picked up in the next chapter. The latter is often the result of funding cuts and lunch breaks shortened to increase curriculum time and reduce the potential for behaviour issues.

Students with a learner identity made fragile by experience are more dependent on interest. Yet the narrowing of the curriculum and squeezing out of creativity, choice and non-academic activity in a bid to get through examined content reduces opportunities for students to feel motivated by interest.

The case study of Michael which follows draws together and illustrates the aspects of responsibility discussed in this section and their impact on learner identity.

Case study: Michael

Michael is a Year 10 student in School B (in Year 11 by the time of the second tracked day). At KS2 he got Level 5 in both English and maths and is therefore

categorised as a high prior attainer. However, he underachieves throughout secondary. In academic profile, Michael is typical of the high prior attaining white-working class students about which the school are particularly concerned.

Michael dislikes being in the struggle zone of learning, particularly in subjects such as history, geography, maths, English and science in which he exhibits a fragile learner identity. When faced with difficulty in these subjects he tries to get away with doing as little as possible. However, he also loses interest if the work is too easy. Teachers must therefore pitch work in a fairly narrow range in order to keep him engaged, and/or use pedagogical strategies which support him to persevere.

As discussed above, Michael's year 11 maths teacher is skilful at providing support and insisting that he does his share of cognitive work. Although Michael says *'I just enjoy the other subjects more than maths. Maths is like, there's a lot of thinking in it and I think it's more of a struggle compared to other subjects'* I observed him focus and persevere throughout the maths lesson, including asking the teacher for help. This is in contrast to his history lesson where the teacher does not use pedagogical strategies which ensure everyone does their share of cognitive work or provide effective support. Although Michael sits at the front in this lesson to improve his focus, the teacher positions himself one desk into the room and so has his back to Michael. There is no interaction between them and the teacher does not notice Michael's lack of engagement in verbal or written tasks. Consequently, there is little written in Michael's book and he expresses a sense of helplessness and low motivation in relation to this subject: *'if you don't want to it's like you know you can try harder, but you just don't know how and what to do to get along'*.

These contrasting experiences illustrate the importance of what happens in the classroom. Michael finds both subjects difficult, but the maths teacher enables him to be active, seek support and persevere whereas in history he is not active or resourceful and therefore makes very little progress (history was his lowest end of year 10 exam grade).

Michael's favourite GCSE subjects are business studies and IT. He is interested in both and has a strong relationship with both teachers. As discussed above, the IT

teacher has worked skilfully to create a motivated and resourceful class of students. In the business studies lessons, although several other students are disengaged, Michael is one of the top students and praised by his teacher. Michael is intrinsically interested in the subject because he is able to see the real-world relevance of ideas and it links to (or has shaped) career aspirations. He works conscientiously through both observed lessons, consulting with his partner and making notes as the teacher talks. However, these are only two subjects out of eight.

Michael makes a clear link between choice of subjects he is interested in and level of application: *'the subjects that I picked are stuff that I want to do well in, so it made me work harder. Like in year 9 we were just doing every subject, so I didn't try as hard'*. Michael admits that he did not always behave well at KS3 or try his best. He is more focused now he is studying two subjects he likes and GCSE final grades are imminent. However, lost learning during KS3, and KS4 learning experiences in which he is not active or resourceful, are likely to lead to lower GCSE grades than his KS2 attainment projected.

This case study illustrates the importance of active learning, enabling students to be resourceful and the role of interest in shaping the way that students feel about themselves as learners. It also picks up on the discussion from the school ethos chapter about the critical role of KS3 in laying the foundations for success at KS4. As Steph from School A comments:

'they're quite malleable and sweet in Year 7: 'I can't do something', 'oh go on give it a go' and they'll give it a go [but] as they get older, they put up more and more barriers. So I would like us to be focusing more on year 7s and having a programme from year 7 because they just disappear in year 8 and 9. All that happens is their parents get called up to the school every two minutes because they're misbehaving or this or that. And then suddenly in year 10 and 11 we refocus our energies on 'oh they're really massively underachieving what interventions can we put in' and we do loads of interventions. People

work tirelessly with them in years 10 and 11 but I think we've missed a whole big chunk in years 7, 8 and 9' (Steph, staff, School A)

Here Steph calls attention to the potential to shape and strengthen learner identity in KS3. Students can be encouraged to come out of their comfort zone more easily before 'barriers' are erected. These barriers may be because of disaffection with school, a defensive response to feeling unconfident or unsafe, or unwillingness to take risks in relation to social identity. Currently Steph (and others) feel there is insufficient attention and resource invested in students as learners in KS3. They 'disappear in year 8 and 9', only visible as behaviour concerns. By the time attention is refocused on them in KS4, fragile learner identities and learning habits have become established and are much harder to shift. KS3 is a crucial period in which students' skills and attitudes to learning are shaped in preparation for the increasingly demanding content of KS4.

What happens in the classroom is central to this opportunity to strengthen learner identity. When students feel safe and supported in lessons and are given opportunities to be active, take responsibility and become resourceful, they are in a better position for this to happen.

Conclusion

How a student feels about themselves as a learner has an impact on how effectively they learn. What happens in the classroom directly affects students' learning experiences. This study found that for white working-class students, their levels of felt safety and the extent to which they are able to take responsibility for their learning are important factors which influence their learner identities. These aspects of classroom experience are likely to be important for all students but white working-class students whose learner identity has been made fragile by previous experience may be particularly sensitive to their presence or absence.

My research supports Bourdieu's explanation of why it is easier for middle-class children to achieve in the education system than those from a working-class

background; their home habitus is congruent with that of school and their knowledge of the 'rules of the game' enables them to use various capitals to successfully navigate the field. Their sense of entitlement (Lareau, 2003) and upbringing mean that they feel more confident to put up their hand to ask or answer a question, say they don't understand, or seek additional support, than working-class children. Positive experiences of learning strengthen learner identity and those with a strong learner identity find it easier to engage with an academically heavy curriculum, such as that which dominates the current educational landscape.

My findings suggest that it is important for teachers to create a safe space in their classrooms where *all* students feel supported to secure their understanding and able to take responsibility for their learning, not just those who are structurally advantaged. Since classroom practice is influenced by school ethos, this needs to be attended to as much as the actions of individual teachers. However, this 'levelling of the playing field' is difficult in a context of performance pressure and funding cuts which prompt schools to adopt a transmission model of teaching, narrow the curriculum, reduce student agency and neglect the social and emotional aspects of learning, many of which are features of pedagogies of poverty which disproportionately affect working-class students.

Despite intentions to reduce inequality in education, the logic Willis pointed out in 1977 still applies: *'educational advantage is controlled through the 'fair' meritocratic testing of precisely those skills which 'cultural capital' provides (p.128)*. The first set of inverted commas draw attention to the fallacy of meritocracy (Reay, 2017). The second set to the means by which the dominant class perpetuate power relations by making success dependent on forms of capital they inherit by birth (Bourdieu, 1977 p.188). As Willis points out, it is understandable for working-class pupils not to place their trust in a system which disadvantages them; although a few individuals might succeed, the social group never will.

In the introduction to this chapter, I stated the prevalence of a fragile learner identity in white working-class students and said that the reasons are complex. The historical relationship with the education system which Willis discusses is an important contributory factor. White working-class families have learnt that more often than not

the education system does not serve the interests of the working-class or prepare them effectively for employment. In the past, not doing well in school would consign young people to a life of manual labour. However, the labour market restructuring of the last fifty years (Bottero, 2009) means there is instead an increasing correlation between poor academic attainment and unemployment or insecure working conditions. Both of these impact on working-class identity and mental health, which in turn affect children's learner identities and relationship with education (as will be explored in the following chapter). Academic success is therefore increasingly important even though the structural inequalities which discriminate against large swathes of the population are still firmly in place.

Some working-class children may be highly motivated to overcome structural inequalities: to learn the 'rules of the game' and succeed educationally. For example, immigrant families who expect to have to learn new 'rules of the game' and see this as reasonable investment for the prospect of better life chances and/or a necessary survival strategy to cope with racism. Or children from ethnic groups whose habitus or cultural values are aligned with those of the English education system. Or aspirant white working-class families who have adopted middle-class parenting practices and values and are happy to 'play the game'. Students from these families, such as Mandy (School A), Liam (School B) and Daisy (School C) may still struggle, but there is a determination to accrue relevant capitals and navigate the field which enables them to remain engaged and develop a strong learner identity.

However, other white working-class children (and those from other ethnic groups) may experience symbolic violence from the educational system and be weakened by or reject school. Kulz explores this process in *Factories for Learning* (2017). Such institutions impose a dominant set of values justified by moral purpose and the notion that '*structure liberates*' the working-class. Students in such institutions must conform either willingly or under duress. The school in Kulz's study is at an extreme end of the continuum but Schools A and B in my study share many of its characteristics, such as an emphasis on control and conformity. Students who resist are constituted as the '*unintelligible learners*' of Youdell's work (2003). In this study, Leanne (School A) and Billy (School B) are examples of such students.

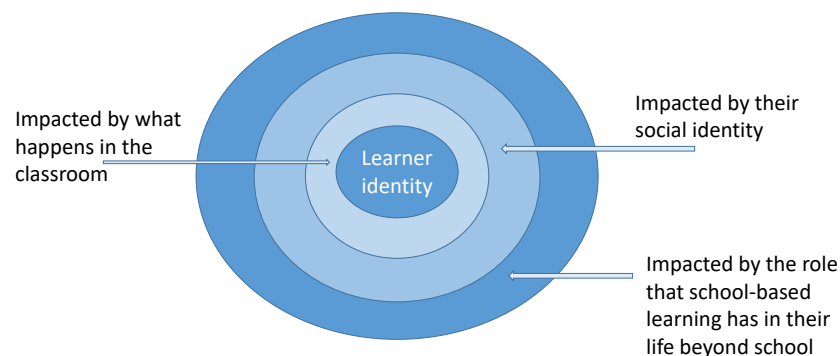
As discussed in the previous two chapters, schools can reduce the symbolic violence of the system by creating a broader and more inclusive ethos and by investing in relationships and the social and emotional aspects of learning so that students feel seen, heard and valued for who they are. This is important because students who experience symbolic violence are less likely to feel safe and supported in the school environment. As exemplified, individual teachers may enable them to feel safe and supported and thus help to strengthen learner identity. However, without whole school structures and an institutional habitus which values such approaches, learner identity is vulnerable. These students are also less able to take responsibility for their learning; they do not feel empowered to be active and resourceful or feel that the curriculum is tailored to their interests. This gives rise to the passivity reported and observed in white working-class students such as Linda (School A), Michael, Ben and Johnny (School B).

This chapter has explored how students' classroom experiences affect their learner identities and how these are also shaped by student-teacher relationships and institutional habitus. The next chapter will focus on the second and third layer of the concentric circles affecting learning identity: social identity and the role of education in the student's life outside school. These pick up on the peer relationships discussed in the previous chapter and the interaction between school and home habitus signalled by the reference to Willis's work above. As such the next chapter continues to explore the reasons behind the prevalence of a fragile learner identity in white working-class students and how this is both exacerbated and mitigated by school practices.

Chapter 8: Learner Identity (Part 2)

Introduction

This chapter explores how social identity impacts learner identity and how the interaction between home and school habitus affects how students feel about themselves as learners. As such it focuses on the second two layers of the concentric circles in the diagram below and follows on from the previous chapter which focused on the first layer. Here I am using social identity to mean the sense of self we have in relation to others in our social sphere, inflected by characteristics such as class, gender and race. In the teenage years, the peer group is increasingly important in defining a sense of self (Warin, 2010) which makes these processes particularly pertinent to the secondary school context.



This chapter builds on ideas discussed in Chapter 5 about how a narrow academic ethos can alienate working-class students and in Chapter 6 about students' concern with acceptance into a peer group and how these dynamics can have a significant impact on engagement with school. In this chapter I develop my argument about how the privileging of academic values can create an opposition between the school and social group which makes it more difficult for white working-class students to succeed academically at the same time as be accepted by their peers (see also Archer et al, 2007; Hollingworth, 2015), thus prompting a choice between investment in institutional and social capitals. I suggest that this is partly because of the way in which concern with social identity can distract from work and reduce behaviours

which strengthen learner identity, such as putting up a hand to contribute. As in chapter 6, I explore the gender implications of this phenomenon; how it is similar and different for girls and boys.

This chapter also examines the impact of teachers' perceptions: how the pejorative discourses surrounding the white working-class affect how teachers see and respond to students who are part of a white working-class social group. It builds on previous research on the impact of teacher perception on student outcome (Bradbury, 2013; Francis et al, 2019) to suggest that teachers' attitudes influence students' self-perception and therefore contribute to the strengthening or weakening of learner identity. A student's social identity therefore affects their learner identity directly through impact on learning behaviours and indirectly through its influence on how teachers treat them.

The second part of this chapter focuses on how a student's life beyond school, and the relationship between home and school, affects learner identity. This section engages with discourses of aspiration and in so doing considers findings about careers advice and guidance. Institutional habitus and the doxa of wider educational discourse influence how a range of aspirations are, or are not, recognised and supported and thus to what extent students feel that school is relevant to their future. Home habitus affects how education is positioned in the home and how aspirations develop. The interaction of institutional and home habitus thus impacts on students' learner identities, their orientation to school and life thereafter.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the three layers in the diagram above work together in ways which often disadvantage white working-class students: their capitals and habitus make them less likely to thrive in certain classroom conditions; they are at greater risk of conflict between social and learner identity; and less likely to see school as relevant to their lives.

Part 1: The impact of social identity on learner identity

The observation data suggested that students who are concerned about or preoccupied with their social identity are often distracted from the focus of the lesson and unable to apply themselves fully. This weakens learner identity because they are not mastering the content of the lesson and thus building subject specific capital, or connected to their self as mathematician, or historian, or scientist – whatever specific identity that subject seeks to develop.

For example, Carol and Katie are both part of a monocultural white working-class friendship group in School C which frequently became involved in psychosocial ‘*dramas*’. These are conflicts within a social group with a psychological and emotional charge akin to those depicted in soap operas; friends argue, betray or slander each other, allegiances are tested, and there are scenes and sometimes tears. Carol says when she is caught up in peer conflict:

‘you won’t really concentrate on what people’s telling you.. you’re just thinking what they’ve been doing to you and how they’re treating you’ (Carol, student, School C)

The ‘*people*’ she refers to are teachers, while ‘*they*’ in the second sentence are peers. Her ability to concentrate on lessons is undermined by preoccupation with peer conflict. Katie also reports peer anxiety and problems with concentration.

Several focus group teachers talked about the way in which peers distracted their case study students from learning, either because peer dynamics can feed misbehaviour or because of peer conflict. Both are relevant to Sam’s case study student Henry whose ‘*toxic relationship*’ with his white working-class best friend distracts him from learning because they are either goading each other to misbehave or distressed by conflict between them.

As well as being a distraction, concern about social identity can inhibit behaviours which would strengthen learner identity. Liam in School B brought a strong learner identity from primary school, but his mother feels he has had to hide his worker persona since starting secondary school. This was observed during both tracked days in which Liam messed about with peers instead of working when he could get

away with it. On two specific occasions there were students who chose to work but Liam joined the off-task majority rather than align himself with the minority of focused students thereby choosing to invest in social rather than institutional capital. Over time his performance as 'one of the lads' may become an internalised self-perception which supersedes the more studious self he brought from primary school.

Johnny at School B (whose case study featured in Chapter 6) does not put up his hand for fear of giving the wrong answer and looking weak in front of his peers and feels he cannot express himself in drama for fear of being teased. As explored in the previous chapter, feeling safe to ask and answer questions, taking an active role in lessons and being interested are important ways to strengthen learner identity. For Johnny, all these behaviours are limited by concerns about social identity.

In the focus group interview Johnny's 'magic wand' wish was: *'I'd make the school disappear'* (Johnny, student, School B). This anti-school feeling received social approbation: three other students agreed thereby winning him social capital, but of a type set up in opposition to school. Observation and comments in one-to-one interviews reveal that Johnny has difficulty fitting in socially. Although pair work supports him to bond with peers in ways which build academically supportive social capital, the institutional habitus means that such occasions are rare. For a student who struggles to make friends, finding solidarity through anti-school feeling makes his learner identity vulnerable; he may further limit helpful learning behaviours to win social approval, even though the type of social capital it secures undermines educational success.

Although Johnny says he prefers secondary to primary school, he cannot be said to be happy or flourishing. He fears being teased and cannot develop his creative self in drama (see above), music (where he is compelled to play the violin rather than the preferred guitar), or English (where he has been moved out of a set where he enjoyed creative writing to one he *'hates'*). The institutional habitus limits opportunities to bond socially over shared work-related outcomes and therefore does not support the cultivation of social capital (friendships) which are compatible with, rather than in opposition to academic success.

Linda's learner identity is similarly adversely affected by concerns about social identity. The case study about Linda in the previous chapter illustrates how fear of looking '*dumb*' in front of her peers or drawing attention to herself inhibits Linda's ability to put up her hand to ask or answer questions and to say she doesn't understand. Like Johnny, she needs support to make friends and benefits from pair work in lessons but finds that these opportunities are limited by an institutional habitus which values silent classrooms. Linda's coping mechanism is to frequently absent herself from school and thereby miss whole chunks of learning which make it more difficult to engage when she returns. Linda has several traits associated with an 'ideal learner' (Youdell, 2006; Francis and Skelton, 2005) such as a regular reading habit, good behaviour, and completion of homework. However, her learner identity is weakened by social issues which reduce helpful behaviours and prompt high levels of absence.

As can be seen by the examples of Linda and Johnny, the institutional habitus of Schools A and B do not promote peer support and thus reduce the capacity for students to be resources for each other and to develop academically supportive social capital through shared work in lessons. Furthermore, these students are at risk as part of a wider white working-class social group which is often alienated by an institutional habitus which privileges academic attainment (see chapter 5). Students such as Linda and Johnny neither feel comfortable within their peer group nor able to align themselves with the institution. They are misfits who become school averse, bullied or contorted by their attempts to fit in. Others who do bond with their peers are at risk in a different way: through the creation of a social identity defined in opposition to school which develops oppositional social capital. This intersects with gender in particular ways.

Implications of social identity for boys

In Liam (above) and Michael (case study in previous chapter) we see traces of the tensions detailed in Shaun's story (Reay, 2002). Both students have kudos within their male peer group and navigate how to retain this social identity at the same time as fulfil their academic promise. To do this, they downplay behaviours associated with being a '*teacher's pet*' (Liam's mother, School B) or '*ear'ole*' (Willis, 1977) such

as putting up their hand or showing interest (except in socially acceptable subjects such as business studies or IT) and divert energy into consolidating social capital through surreptitious chat or messing about. Their educational context is more conducive to learning than Shaun's. However, the learner identity they perform and thereby come to inhabit (Youdell, 2003) does not include the skills and dispositions needed for academic excellence.

Michael's lack of resilience and resourcefulness in all but business studies and IT jeopardise his attainment; three years of minimal effort at KS3 have created learning patterns which are hard to shift. Liam is at the start of this journey but the discrepancy between his perception of his effort and mine suggest that he may find himself in a similar position in KS4. For example, he claimed *'I try to do my hardest in all the lessons'* (Liam, student, School B) at the end of a day which included low level talk throughout a library lesson. When questioned further about this (and other instances) he was quick to blame others without acknowledging his part in the *'disruptions'*:

'I couldn't put that much effort in because there was a lot of disruptive, disruptions with people like making noises and things like that' (Liam, student, School B)

It may be that the effort he experiences is in part due to the psychic strain of having to both complete an adequate amount of work to satisfy the institution and modify his behaviour to maintain social credibility (Reay, 2002); to balance investment in institutional and social capital. However, if all his effort went into work, he would make better progress.

Michael and Liam are the high prior attainers in the sample from School B. James and Billy are at the other end of the attainment spectrum and stand to gain more capital from their social identity than from putting effort into lessons. The tensions between their learner and social identity are more akin to the boys in Willis (1977) or Evans (2006) studies who reject schoolwork as feminine and cultivate a counter school culture which affords what they perceive as real world, masculine capitals. In doing so they fall into the *'identity trap'* (2003) which Youdell discusses in relation to

Black Caribbean boys in which the very behaviours which earn social capital are those which render them unintelligible as learners in the school context. James is the student discussed in the Chapter 6 who goes to extraordinary lengths to ‘conceal’ his engagement and interest because of his class clown persona.

Billy is a KS3 boy in bottom sets whose needs and interests are not met by school and whose consequent boredom results in misbehaviour. At primary school he was helped by a teaching assistant to get his ideas on paper and had a ‘clicker’ to press to help him focus. However, at secondary school information about his eyesight, processing and handwriting issues are not effectively disseminated and no ‘clicker’ is provided (despite the frequent use of sensory objects in settings such as pupil referral units where they assist students to emotionally regulate). Although I raised these issues with a senior leader and suggested strategies such as a laptop, a clicker and informing teachers that he needed to sit at the front of every lesson, nothing had been done to meet his learning needs by the time of the second tracking day a term later. Instead, Billy had developed a swagger when walking, a slouch when sitting and a striking asymmetric hairstyle which suggested successful accumulation of the kinds of capital respected by his social group and condemned by school. Without support to strengthen his learner identity Billy has made a pragmatic choice, but one which now sets him up in opposition to school.

Implications of learner identity for girls

Academic success is not as antithetical to white working-class femininity, as it is for masculinity (Francis and Skelton, 2005). However, girls also grapple with a misalignment of capitals which can exacerbate alienation and opposition between social group and school. They are also driven by a need for social acceptance which impacts on learner identity. However, this is more because of overt preoccupation with affective relations (Skeggs, 1997) than the felt need to downplay academic interest as seen in boys.

Physical appearance forms the site of a clash between capitals at School A. Chapter 5 described the ritual policing of the body which occurs every morning as girls arrive at school and have their fingers checked for nail polish. Archer (2007) and Skeggs

(1997) have written about the ways in which working-class girls use physical appearance as a form of cultural, or corporeal capital. School A uses strict uniform policies to shut down this possibility, exert control and ensure that girls conform to middle-class notions of an ideal learner. Ironically, this makes the school seem to value (non-working-class) appearance more than academic engagement, although the systems are in place to reassert the value of academic over corporeal capital. Below is an excerpt from a KS4 focus group:

'Student 1: They care too much about uniform and that

Student 2: yeah

Student 3: yeah and our appearance

Student 1: they make it more of a big deal than things that need to be paid more attention to. They don't pay as much attention to things, say, if you've got two earrings in your ears they pay more attention to that than

Student 2: yeah

Student 1: how you're doing in lessons' (KS4 students, School A)

This illustrates the discrepancy between what a school thinks it is doing and students' felt experience, as discussed in the school ethos chapter. For the school, the value placed on academic success must make *'how you're doing in lessons'* more important than earrings. However, the lack of attention to wellbeing and pupil voice and the tight systems of control mean that students feel more scrutinised (on a surface level) than cared about (on a deeper level).

Uniform infringements become a form of rebellion and resistance against misrecognition:

'[white working-class] girls have come into school deliberately wearing a green coat and it's such a small thing but its deliberately saying I don't care, I'm not following your rule. And I guess they do see these rules and these expectations as other because they're, they, we're asking them to fit into a certain culture aren't we and that is like a little rebellion against that culture' (Annie, staff, School A)

Annie acknowledges a clash and the imposition of one culture on another; white working-class students see school systems as *'other'*. She interprets their deliberate rule infringement as a rebellion against this imposition. Uniform can thus be seen as a site where a symbolic battle takes place between the dominant hegemonic order and an alienated social group. The school devalues the strategy working-class girls may use to gain capital and the students unite as a social group to resist this judgement. The struggle thereby consolidates an opposition between *'them'* and *'us'*, as suggested by the stuttering transition between *'they're'* and *'we're'* in Annie's comment.

It is interesting to note that whilst all students and parents interviewed at School A talked about the strict uniform policy, uniform/appearance was not raised by anyone at School C. The female students in school C did not pit themselves against staff; there was more a sense that they were on the same side. Even when one KS4 student complained about the relentless talk about exam preparation, others were quick to say that the school was trying to act in their best interests.

However, common to School A and C is a preoccupation with peer issues which distracts girls from their learning. Skeggs (1997) writes about the importance of respectability and affective relations for working-class women. The psychosocial *'dramas'* which affected Leanne (School A), Carol, Katie and Gemma (School C) seemed often to arise from a perceived insult which had consequences for social standing or reputation.

Although Katie (School C) made a show of popularity as she moved from lesson to lesson, greeting and hugging peers, in one-to-one interview she said most were *'fake friends'* and the only people she really trusted were her mother and two female cousins. She was as anxious about and distracted by social identity as school phobic Linda in School A. Katie externally manifests social anxiety through arguments which polarise group loyalties, whilst Linda's internal manifestation results in withdrawal. For both, an insecure social identity has implications for their learner identity.

Friendship can also be problematic by offering solidarity against the *'other'* of school through the development of oppositional social capital. At School A, Emily's case

study student Carly and her best friend united in their rejection of school. Carly was on her way to exclusion and academic failure until something happened which caused her to break away from the friend. Emily reported:

'She fell out with a significant other student, and she said all she did was bully me and make me feel bad about myself so I'm much happier not being around her' (Emily, staff, School A)

This was an incisive moment for Carly; she realigned herself with peers with stronger learner identities (including the peer Emily had enabled her to work with in maths), began working hard, behaving like a 'good student' and looking happier. The transformation was so striking that teachers in the focus group who did not teach her remarked upon it.

Students such as Carly, Gemma and Dolly have found a social identity and forms of social capital which support academic achievement. Others such as Katie see an innate incompatibility akin to that often experienced by white working-class boys.

'if you're the sort of person in this school who does their work and hasn't really got many friends I feel like they get picked on....like there's this one girl in my class she just does her work she don't really speak she just reads at playtime and lunch and I feel like she gets picked on in class because of it.....to be honest....I prefer being how she is than me cos it's not good to have a lot of friends in a way cos you get into a lot of trouble....and like her having no friends and reading and doing her education I think that's a good thing' (Katie, student, School C)

Here Katie voices the choice that students such as Billy, Johnny, Liam, Michael and James (School B) feel faced with: you either have friends or succeed academically. Being seen to work hard and care about your learning puts you at risk of being 'picked on'. Katie makes short term choices based on social survival. As a troubled and vulnerable student, it may be that within Maslow's hierarchy of needs she prioritises fundamental relational and safety needs. However, there is a wistfulness in the way she talks about 'this one girl in my class'. She perceives that this girl may

benefit in the long term and would *'prefer being how she is than me'*. She perceives that *'doing her education'* is a *'good thing'* but feels constrained from this herself. She is compelled to secure friends (however *'fake'*) but equates them with *'trouble'*. The articulation of these conflicting values conveys how social identity can become a trap which bars students from academic success.

For both boys and girls, concerns about social identity can distract from learning and inhibit helpful learning behaviours. Incompatibilities between which capitals are valued by the social group and school can exacerbate alienation and opposition. The deconstruction of gender stereotypes advocated by Francis and Skelton (2005) and Reay (2002) would help reconcile social and learner identities for boys by making masculinity and school-based learning more compatible and for girls by providing ways to gain capital which do not feed into patriarchal oppression (Archer, 2007). Deconstruction of class stereotypes is also necessary. The way that belonging to a social group can affect teacher perception is the final aspect of this part of the chapter, to which I will now turn.

Teacher perception

In studies of ability grouping (Francis et al, 2019) and assessment (Bradbury, 2013), teacher perception has been shown to affect student outcomes. What teachers think about a student makes a difference to how the student learns in their subject. Pejorative discourse about a group of students is therefore likely to have an impact on how students feel about themselves as learners. If learner identity is a key factor affecting the engagement and achievement of white working-class students, this negative discourse is salient.

When looking through lists of White British Pupil Premium students, teachers in all three schools made comments which suggested a disproportionate number of problematic students. In the process of selecting students to approach for consent to participate in the research, the senior leader in School A discounted most of the year 10 students because of persistent absence and/or disaffection, sometimes correlating with fixed term exclusions. The senior leader in School C felt that many of

the students had sufficiently complex needs, home situations or mental health issues that they would not be suitable.

“when I looked at the White British Pupil Premium students in the two year groups the first thing I thought was there are quite a few of these students who either have SEN needs or have significant external support already because there are significant challenges in their lives outside.....historically we found certainly in 2017 the cohort of students who made least progress through KS4 were the white British students who were high achievers at KS2 and then had significant mental health concerns and their mental health impeded their progress. And so much of their mental health is tied up with maybe entrenched challenges within the family” (staff, School C)

The strong pejorative stereotype and discourse which surrounds the white working-class (Jones, 2011) makes it difficult to disentangle fact and perception. Her comments are based on data: the disproportionate number of SEN or students with external support; and analysis of the 2017 GCSE results mapped to prior attainment and mental health concerns. The link she makes between mental health issues and *‘entrenched challenges within the family’* is more subjective although supported by pastoral records of students’ circumstances and knowledge of established links between childhood trauma and mental health issues independent of social category. However, comments made by teachers such as Rosie (chapter on school ethos) tend towards unfounded generalisations about impoverished home lives.

There may be some factual basis to teachers’ perceptions that white working-class students are more often problematic than students from other groups. However, the danger is that such examples feed confirmation bias and in doing so obscure the many students who do not fit the stereotype and take attention away from looking for the reasons behind those that do. This is similar to the way that institutional racism is linked to disproportionate exclusion rates for black boys; the stereotype influences teachers to see the behaviour of black boys as problematic and their handling creates or exacerbates issues.

Walkerdine et al (2001) give an example of how two girls' similar underachievement was interpreted differently because of their class: the working-class girl was labelled as low ability (despite a high IQ test) but the middle-class girl as simply '*not motivated*' (p.124). This recalls Linda who feels '*dumb*' but is inhibited from asking questions because of social anxiety; Katie who feels '*stupid*' in school but not outside; and Ben who feels like a slow learner in theoretical but not practical subjects. If these were middle class students, their manifestations of disengagement may be interpreted and therefore treated differently, leading to a strengthening of learner identity rather than an erosion. Concepts of fixed ability thus act to discriminate on the basis of class (and race) as working-class children are assumed to be less able whilst middle-class children with a similar educational profile are seen as bright but unmotivated (A. Bradbury, 2021). Indeed, in Walkerdine's example, the middle-class girl goes on to university and a successful career in fashion whilst the working-class girl gets a job as an escort on buses for the disabled, despite the similarity of their early educational underachievement.

Maguire's analysis (2005) of a 'class-crossing teacher' draws attention to '*the micro-practices and textures of class that are woven into the fabric of everyday life in school*' which mean that '*schools can be excluding places for working-class students*' (p.440). While the Black Lives Matter movement has rightly reinvigorated an examination of racial bias in education, class bias is rarely raised or tackled explicitly. Jones (2011) illustrates how the white working-class have been demonised and Reay (2017) calls for greater respect to be accorded to the working-class to mitigate against entrenched educational inequalities. My research supports the presence of class bias in schools and, like Reay, suggests that a fundamental shift in how 'working-class' is regarded is needed to address how teacher perception of students can impact their learner identity. However, it is difficult when euphemistic language such as 'disadvantaged' and 'socially excluded' obscures the root of the problem: a class based society which discriminates against working-class people on a structural and systematic basis.

Below is a case study of Carol who felt drawn to a white working-class friendship group whose behaviours distract her from learning and colour teachers' perceptions.

It therefore brings together some of the ways in which social identity affects learner identity, as discussed in part 1 of this chapter.

Case study: Carol

At the time of the fieldwork, Carol was a year 7 student living with her nan and older siblings. Her nan is very supportive of education: *'when it comes to school, she cares a lot about our education'* and *'my nan don't like me off especially when it comes to school, like she never ever lets us off, never'*. Carol has a strong learner identity in maths which comes in part from the way her nan used to test her on her times tables at a young age: *'since I was in primary I was not like the cleverest but the cleverest for maths'*.

As well as maths, Carol enjoys practical subjects like textiles *'I like making stuff because I'm very creative'*. However, in other subjects her learner identity is fragile and she tends to do the minimum unless skilfully handled by a teacher (similarly to Michael). On several occasions she demonstrated that she had only retained information which she had articulated herself (in support of the importance of talk for learning discussed in the previous chapter). She did not revise for her maths test and wandered off to get a drink when she was supposed to be practising independently in music, despite speaking positively about the lesson. She refers to herself as a *'fidget'* in lessons which suggests difficulties with concentration.

Her family perceive that the social aspects of school impact learning. They took this into account when choosing School C instead of the oversubscribed secondary that her sister attended *'cos I knew too many people in School X that I wouldn't get along with'*. Despite this strategic decision to keep Carol away from certain peers who might negatively impact her education, Carol has made friends with a problematic monocultural group in School C. Carol reports that *'my relationships with teachers ain't that good because the people that I hang around with..... they don't really like them'*. Carol herself is an 'under the radar' student who does not tend to misbehave but some of her teachers' views of her are affected by the social identity she has developed by association.

She gives a specific example of her old English teacher whose perception of Carol was coloured by the disruptive behaviour of some of her friends: *'there was a group of us, and we used to get on, but he never ever picked us [to read], like ever. And then we just didn't bother no more.'* This quotation is cited in the previous chapter to illustrate the impact a teacher can have on engagement.

Carol enjoys pair work, particularly when she can work with her friends with whom she feels comfortable: *'I'm used to them and working with someone else that I'm not like close with would just be kinda weird, I don't know why'*. The preference for familiarity provides a clue as to why Carol was initially drawn to makes friends with the other white working-class girls in her year group. Ethnically these students are in a minority. The school has noticed a pattern over the years whereby the white working-class students gravitate towards each other, forming vertical bonds across year groups as well as within in a way which can unhelpfully segregate them from their peers and the multicultural ethos of the school. Friendships are therefore based on a shared cultural habitus which may involve 'othering'. At School C the high prevalence of mental health issues and SEN needs in the white working-class students are linked to educational underachievement. This means that students such as Carol may form a social identity which puts her learner identity at risk.

Carol has protective factors which support the development of a strong learner identity: a family who value education; confidence and skill in maths; interest in and enjoyment of creative, practical subjects; acceptable behaviour; some teachers who ensure she does her share of cognitive work. However, there are also several factors which put her learner identity at risk: difficulties with concentration; tendency to do minimal work; lack of homework; teachers who see her as part of a problematic white working-class group and respond in a way which reduces engagement; a monocultural friendship group which reinforce negative behaviours and attitudes, fuel the development of oppositional social capital and become embroiled in conflict which distracts from work. Carol's magic wand wish conveys her preoccupation with social issues: *'if I had a magic wand I would [pause] make people not bully people'*. It seems that for Carol, the impact of social identity on learner identity is one of the most significant factors in her educational achievement.

Part 2: How learner identity is affected by the interaction of family and institutional habitus

The similarity of the life worlds of school and home make it easier for middle-class children to feel like ‘fish in water’ in the field of school, whilst working-class children are more likely to feel a disjunction or even a clash between the values and practices of each space (Lareau, 2003; Francis & Perry, 2010; Archer, 2015). This interaction between family and institutional habitus affects how relevant school-based learning feels to students’ lives and to what extent they feel that the school sees and caters for their ‘authentic’ self. If students do not see how school is relevant to their future and/or they feel marginalised by the system, they are less likely to feel motivated and invest effort in their learning, which in turn impacts learner identity.

The complex discourse of aspirations and the concomitant provision of careers advice and guidance are particularly salient. Policy and research documents, politicians and media headlines have lambasted the ‘low aspirations’ of the white working-class and claimed that this is a critical barrier to educational attainment (Francis & Perry, 2010). However, this is a simplistic *‘deficit’* view which *‘has the potential to stigmatise [working-class young people and their families], and conveniently focuses on individual problems rather than institutional, financial or societal explanations’* (Francis & Perry, 2010). Instead, there is a pressing need to validate and support aspirations (Archer, 2012; Menzies, 2013; Reay, 2017) in a system which currently legitimates a narrow definition of success (Spohrer, 2016) and does not recognise the range of capitals needed to navigate a difficult field.

Policy texts make flawed assumptions about working-class aspirations based on the belief that upward social mobility is an inevitable desire and that the system is meritocratic. In other words, that working-class people want to become middle class and that mere effort makes this possible. However, this overlooks the tendency toward social reproduction whereby working-class as well as middle-class students seek to follow in their parents’ footsteps and recreate the habitus in which they were

raised (Hoskins & Barker, 2017). It also overlooks the mythical aspect of meritocracy (Reay, 2017) and the processes by which the very institutions which are supposed to facilitate greater equality in fact reproduce current power relations:

'The educational system helps to provide the dominant class with what Max Weber terms "a theodicy of its own privilege".....through the practical justification of the established order which it achieves by using the overt connection between qualifications and jobs as a smokescreen for the connection - which it records surreptitiously, under cover of formal equality - between the qualifications people obtain and the cultural capital they have inherited - in other words, through the legitimacy it confers on the transmission of this form of heritage.' (Bourdieu, 1977b p.188)

The education system not only advantages middle-class children by linking exam success to their cultural capital but also by legitimating their aspirations. Discourses about raising aspirations centre on working-class children adopting hierarchically 'better' aspirations. They are about getting working-class children to want the same as their middle-class peers: a university education and a professional occupation. Whilst some may want this, not all do. The ways in which schools privilege academic attainment and professional aspirations, marginalise other notions of success and de-legitimate non-professional aspirations have implications for how working-class students feel about themselves as learners in these institutions.

The ways in which working-class aspirations are de-legitimated

Many white working-class students in my study had clear aspirations which were often linked to their family habitus (congruent with the findings of Hoskins and Barker, 2017). However, none of these respondents felt supported to realise these aspirations by their school. Most did not feel that their school was even aware of what their aspirations were. Mandy articulates part of the problem:

'we have assemblies that are all about what you can do when you're older but they're not very, I feel like a lot of people don't even consider that as something they would do in the future. It's more one of those things a girl could do, but it's not really what most people want to do. Like not many

people want to be an engineer, but then the things that people want to do aren't specified and aren't talked about' (Mandy, student, School A)

The school thinks it is providing good quality careers advice and guidance by putting on assemblies and inviting speakers to talk about professional careers, such as engineering. Although these are *'things a girl could do'* they are *'not really what most people want to do'*; they may be 'aspirational' but do not resonate with what students are thinking about for themselves. The students' actual aspirations *'aren't specified and aren't talked about'*; they are implicitly disapproved of, uninvited and silenced.

Two students, a boy from School B and a girl from School A, talked with confidence about their aspiration to work as a plumber and/or electrician. These are mainstream, typically working-class jobs which involve skill and generate a good income and respectability and yet have not featured in any school discourse:

Tommy: plumbing, electricians, all different stuff like that..... I want to learn how to do them and make my own business

Interviewer: OK and do you feel that the school is helping you to realise that ambition?

Tommy: I haven't really spoke about it to the school

Interviewer: OK, do you feel that the subjects you're taking will help you?

(5 second pause)

Tommy: I'm not too sure *(KS4 focus group, School B)*

Gemma: I know what I wanna do, [I want to] be an electrician

Interviewer: Have the school supported you with that aim?

Gemma: not really, I've not really spoke about it..... I don't know if I have to go uni for it either

(KS4 focus group, School C)

Despite being in different schools, Tommy and Gemma's words are remarkably similar; neither have voiced their aspiration to the school and they are uncertain how it fits in with academic study. Tommy is not sure how his GCSE subjects are relevant and Gemma is unsure whether university is necessary. University is what is spoken

about (repeatedly) so it is understandable that she wonders if she is obliged, but relieved when another student says she thinks she can do an apprenticeship instead.

The lack of discourse about routes other than university and jobs other than those associated with the middle-class implies that they are not valued. The lack of vocational courses (discussed in previous chapters), work experience and dialogue with students about what they want to do (as opposed to what the school is interested in) convey a similar message. Like with institutional habitus, meaning in relation to aspirations is conveyed through what is said and unsaid, through curriculum decisions and school systems.

When asked how the school could support students more in what they want to do in life, Mandy responded:

‘actually engage with us about what we want to do and how we could get there instead of just saying the subjects you need to take or the subjects that will get us good results because it will look good for the school if we get good results, instead of the subjects that we actually want to do or the subjects that we think about having a career in’ (Mandy, student, School A)

She would like dialogue rather than being told; concern about her future rather than the school’s reputation; to be seen as who she is rather than what the school would like her to be. Mandy’s aspiration is to be a mental health therapist. She intends to do A Levels but says *‘I don’t really want to stay here’*. Although School A *‘gets good results’* she would prefer a sixth form college; a setting associated with more freedom and diversity where she may feel she has more agency and can be fully herself.

How home habitus can help school-based learning feel relevant and important Mandy’s mother has similarly mixed feelings about the school. She calls the way a uniform incident was handled *‘barbaric’* (Mandy was excluded for a day for wearing trainers), was unsatisfied with the response to her complaint about a maths teacher,

and is dismayed by the lack of careers advice and guidance. The onus has been on her to source prospectuses and work experience for Mandy; a middle-class cultural logic which disadvantages those who do not buy into or have the capitals to fulfil this role (Vincent, 2001).

Mandy's mother's proactive involvement in Mandy's education is likely to have contributed to her strong learner identity. This is congruent with the role that family played in the academic success of all the participants in Travers's study (2017). In my study, the same is also true of Daisy (School C). Her mother attended a university open day with her daughter (set up by the school); supports Daisy to complete homework; engages in dialogue about how to resolve social and work priorities; discusses aspirations; and provides financial support for Daisy's educational success (investment in a laptop and maths tutor).

The way in which education is positioned in Daisy and Mandy's homes aligns with middle-class parenting practices and habitus and enables these students to feel a congruence between the values of each sphere. Daisy and her mother feel fully supported by School C whereas Mandy and her mother have had to battle to be seen and heard at School A. Nonetheless, the way in which these mothers have enabled school-based learning to feel relevant and important has made a positive contribution to their daughters' learner identities.

Other families may be less able or willing to play this role. In such cases it is even more important for schools to enable students to see the relevance of their learning and help them make connections between the worlds they inhabit inside and outside school, rather than to emphasise differences.

The importance of making links between school and life beyond
My data suggests that students need to see the relevance of what they are studying to invest effort into engaging with and mastering it. However, the links between school and life beyond it are often unclear; there are few vocational routes; there is little meaningful work experience (largely due to funding cuts); career advice and guidance is impersonal and skewed towards academic routes; and teachers often do

not talk about how the skills and knowledge of their subject can be applied to a range of careers (Archer, 2012, 2015). The aspirations of white working-class students are therefore often simultaneously: heavily influenced by home habitus; not necessarily dependent on academic success; de-legitimated by institutional habitus.

Understandably this has an impact on how students feel about themselves as learners within school.

Shahina, a science teacher at School A, is a strong advocate of the value of work experience and making links between lesson content and practical application (in support of Archer 2012, 2015). She feels that such links are particularly important to the engagement of White British FSM students:

'if we compare white British students who are disadvantaged, to other disadvantaged students, that disconnect doesn't matter, they will still try to apply themselves.....[but] these are students who learn through practical work, like going into work experience and learning from that, applying the theories that they learn' (Shahina, staff, School A)

Although this generalisation needs to be questioned, there is value in Shahina's observation that the white working-class students who she has brought to mind are particularly in need of seeing and feeling the relevance of what they learn in school in order to *'apply themselves'* and thereby strengthen their learner identity. This was supported by student comments, particularly about maths. Johnny (KS3) and Ben (KS4) both struggle to see the point of algebra even though it has a wide range of real world applications:

'When will you actually need to do algebra in the real world unless you're going to be something like a mathematician? When will you really need to calculate the area or perimeter of a cube or anything like that?' (Johnny, student, School B)

'I don't understand algebra and things like that. I mostly don't understand things that I don't see myself or anyone else using outside of school' (Ben, student, School B)

Johnny sees algebra as the preserve of mathematicians. Even the application of more basic area and volume calculations elude him. For Ben, theoretical understanding is dependent on practical use. A maths teacher at School C mentioned a colleague who had talked explicitly about the relevance of maths to a range of careers and felt this was *'the key'* to a change in attitude of her students. However, Shahina and this maths colleague are exceptions; more usually there is an invisible wall between the curriculum content as covered in school and life lived outside it.

Habitus shapes aspirations (Archer, 2012; Hoskins & Barker, 2017) yet students are neither being supported to achieve the working-class aspirations they have, nor enabled to see the relevance of what they are studying to careers beyond that habitus. This contributes to feelings of alienation and marginalisation and is a barrier to motivation and engagement. This study therefore supports the recommendations made by Francis and Perry in 2010: a focus on educational engagement and ownership as a precursor to achievement; attention to vocational routes and careers in addition to academic routes; and a focus on and valuing of the existing knowledges of working-class young people.

These all point to the need for a healthier interaction between home and school habitus such that working-class students can feel and be supported by a congruence which is currently the preserve of the middle-class. School is a complex field, as is the fast-changing landscape of employment beyond it. The skills and capitals needed to navigate movement from home to school and then into independent life are myriad. There are multiple cracks to fall between - more for working-class than middle-class children - yet the simplistic discourse of low aspirations blames white working-class culture rather than the structures which disempower them. The case study of Ben below illustrates some of the ideas covered in the second part of this chapter.

Case study: Ben (School B)

Ben tends to be quiet and passive in lessons. He was in year 10 in the first term of the fieldwork and year 11 in the second and is classified by the school as a low prior attainer. Ben locates his disinterest in school in himself rather than in aspects of the school system in concordance with the neoliberal focus on individual deficit as opposed to structural inequality: *'this school is a good school, but I just don't like school in general'*.

Ben struggles to work independently; there does not seem to be a natural space for homework in his life outside school and he is easily distracted. He says: *'I do six hours in school so I kind of want a break, and I get distracted really easily, so it takes me off topic, like outside of school, and in'*. When asked what distracts he replies: *'near enough anything'*. His family habitus does not support the completion of homework: there is no one at home who ensures he does it and the way he speaks of it as an imposition on free time suggests this view is normalised. However, lack of completion contributes to him feeling that he is behind in several subjects.

Ben makes a distinction between theoretical and practical types of learning. His strength and preference are for the practical: *'I'm just not that fast of a learner when it comes to theory and things like that'*. He makes a clear link between interest and effective learning when he says he enjoys *'practical things because I'm more interested so I feel that I learn better'*. However, there are limited opportunities to study practical subjects or engage in learning in an active way.

When talking about learning in history he says: *'after I leave the class, like, the next lesson I won't remember'*. When talking about writing in English he says: *'cos I know I'm a slow writer I feel like I need [a] head start to finish it'*. His comment about maths has already been cited: *'I don't understand algebra and things like that, I mostly don't understand things that I don't see myself or anyone else using outside of school'*.

There is one student he sits next to in history and maths who helps him but in most lessons he sits alone and/or the lessons are in silence. These comments convey the sense of a student who struggles to learn effectively in a traditional classroom setting: facts encountered through reading and listening don't stay in his head; he

writes too slowly to make fast paced activities comfortable; he doesn't see the relevance of what he is learning in maths; valuable peer support is limited. It is not surprising that he does not feel confident about himself as a learner or enjoy school.

In School B, history or geography are compulsory options – part of an effort to get students to take more academic subjects. This means that students' free choice is limited to two subjects. Ben is interested in PE (*'that's the lesson I learn most in'*), food technology and business studies but he can only take two of these non-academic subjects. He says *'I would have picked business, over history'* but ends up doing history which *'I'm not that interested in'*, PE and food technology. He falls behind with the theory side of PE and would like to attend after school sessions to catch up. However, as cited in the chapter on school ethos, he is not allowed to because they clash with compulsory English sessions.

Ben has a learner identity which has been made more fragile by the limited opportunity to study subjects which interest him and the passive mode of learning he most often occupies. Currently his timetable is dominated by subjects which do not interest him and he has fallen behind in PE, a subject he would like to pursue as a career. This is in part because of an institutional habitus which privileges academic attainment, promotes pedagogies which encourage passivity and does not attend to the social and emotional aspects of learning.

On the first tracked day I accompanied Ben and a handful of other students to a careers fair. There was no preparation for the event and no follow up. The students wandered around, unsure how to engage with what was on offer: they did not know what questions to ask and were not forthcoming when stallholders spoke to them. Despite the vast array of careers represented, after the event Ben said: *'I didn't see that many that I was that much interested in. I think I only saw one that I was interested in'*. This was a sports business apprenticeship which was already an area of interest. He gave them his name and email address. A term later he was still interested but said: *'I don't know how to do it or get it sorted out'* and in response to further probing said: *'I don't know, I'm gonna have to ask, like a teacher, like the headteacher or something'*.

This illustrates the mismatch between what a school feels it is providing and students' felt experience. The school had arranged an opportunity but the lack of preparation or follow up significantly undermined its value for students. Ben was unable to widen his aspirations or make solid progress with an existing idea. The powerlessness evident in his answer about how to follow up on the sports business apprenticeship underlines a lack of systematic support: there is a careers advisor in the school but he does not know she exists; his tutor or PE teachers are not thought of; instead he invokes the ultimate symbol of institutional power and knowledge (the headteacher) who will not have time to help.

If the apprenticeship doesn't work out, his options are to get into a gaming company through a friend or scaffold with his brother. As with middle-class children, his family habitus provide him with social capital which may lead to employment. However, these options are unrelated to the 11 years he has spent in compulsory education. The interaction of home and institutional habitus has resulted in a young man with a fragile learner identity who does not feel that his interests or aspirations are validated or supported by school.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which social identity impacts on learner identity. I have demonstrated how concerns about social identity can distract from work and inhibit helpful learning behaviours, thereby building on the previous chapter about the impact of classroom conditions. Such inhibition is particularly salient to the white working-class boys in my study who tend to downplay their interest and engagement in school related learning as part of an effort to reconcile the seeming incompatibility of white working-class masculinity and academic success. Whilst white working-class femininity is not as antithetical to academic success, a clash of capitals can take the form of a symbolic battle over physical appearance in which corporeal capital becomes a form of resistance against the imposition of disciplinary power. This opposition between 'us' and 'them' is more likely to occur when the social group feel marginalised. In such cases the social group is positioned in

opposition to school which means that students' need to belong to a peer group undermines their learner identity. Students can become caught in an 'identity trap' (Youdell, 2003) whereby the capitals associated with social success make them unintelligible as learners within the school habitus.

In the cases of School A and School B, marginalisation is a product of an institutional habitus which privileges academic attainment and middle class values and implicitly judges working-class culture. It is exacerbated by systems of control which reduce individual agency, together with a lack of attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning. Two manifestations of this are silent lessons and minimal opportunities for cooperative learning. Such conditions increase social and cognitive anxiety and remove the chance for students to bond over shared work-related outcomes (thus developing academically supportive social capital) or be resourceful – all of which have classroom-based implications for learner identity, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the case of School C, a more inclusive institutional habitus, a dialogic approach to behaviour management and attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning mean that students feel supported rather than othered by the school. However, a strong tendency for white working-class girls to form monocultural friendship groups characterised by conflict and psychosocial 'dramas' reinforces negative behaviours and attitudes, fuels oppositional social capital and so undermines the development of a strong learner identity, even when students see the value of education (such as Carol and Katie). Such friendship groups can influence teacher perception of individuals and feed pejorative discourses about white working-class students. Teacher perception affects how students feel about themselves as learners and therefore impacts engagement and achievement.

When students form a social identity which is compatible with academic success, they can support each other effectively and thrive (such as Dolly and Emily in School C and Carly in School A – the latter two once free from an unhealthy friendship). However, often students feel the need to choose between social acceptance and engagement with learning; between investment in social and institutional capital. It may seem easier or safer to choose social acceptance, particularly when learning

needs are not met (such as Billy in School B). Some students can navigate a path between the two, however this involves psychic strain and compromises attainment (Liam and Michael in School B). Students such as Linda (School A) or Johnny (School B) do not have either option because they do not fit in socially or with the middle-class habitus of school. They are therefore at risk of school aversion and/or bullying, neither of which facilitate a strong learner identity.

Deconstruction of gender and class stereotypes in schools (and across society more generally) has the capacity to reduce oppositional forces so that students thrive both socially and academically. However, fundamental changes are also needed to the interaction between institutional and home habitus if students are to feel able to be fully themselves and engage with learning. In the second part of this chapter, I turned attention to this interaction and discussed how it can impact learner identity. I explained how the discourse of low aspirations is simplistic in the way it emphasises individual or cultural deficit rather than structural constraint. I went on to demonstrate how a structural feature of society and the education system – namely the privileging of middle-class aspirations – works to delegitimise working-class aspirations and make school feel less relevant to white working-class students who do not aspire to university.

Similar to the privileging of academic success discussed in the chapter on ethos, the lack of value attached to working-class aspirations is conveyed in myriad ways: through the pathways and professions which are spoken about and resourced, and those that are not; through the absence of vocational pathways and work experience which emphasise the practical application of skills and knowledge; through careers advice and guidance which does not provide the support needed to broaden or realise non-middle-class aspirations. I explained that many students I interviewed had clear aspirations influenced by their home habitus but that none had voiced these to the school or felt supported to realise them, and many did not understand the relevance of what they were studying in school to life outside.

Like with school ethos, I observed a mismatch between what schools believed they were providing and students' felt experience. In the case of career advice and guidance this was rooted in a misrecognition of working-class aspirations and an

underestimation of the need to make clear links between curriculum content and possible careers. There was also an underestimation of the complex range of capitals needed to develop and realise ambitions for those whose life worlds inside and outside school are not mutually reinforcing. The system is set up to serve middle-class children and does not take sufficient account of the differences and difficulties which may be experienced by working-class children.

The desire to reproduce one's cultural habitus, or follow in one's parents' footsteps, is natural; that it happens almost inevitably is part of Bourdieu's concept. However, this tendency in middle-class students is condoned whilst the same tendency in working-class students is condemned. Building on the work of Gewirtz (2010), I argued that a key flaw in government rhetoric concerning social mobility is the assumption that working-class people want to become middle-class and that this is possible through mere effort (meritocracy). Whereas the structures of the education system (and wider society) favour the cultural capital of the middle-class and therefore fundamentally discriminate against the working-class – a logic Willis and Bourdieu drew attention to in the 1970s and which remains true today.

In my study, students who experienced a greater congruence or harmony between home and institutional habitus had stronger learner identities. The most straightforward example is Daisy in School C who aspired to go to university and whose family were actively supportive of and supported by school. However, for Liam in School B, this harmony was threatened by social identity concerns which were leading him to perform a less studious version of himself. Whilst for Mandy and her family, School A's controlling approach undermined her enjoyment and prompted her to want to pursue A Levels elsewhere.

The more fragile learner identities of other students can be attributed to a range of factors which map onto the diagrammatic representation included at the start of this chapter. These factors are listed here, from classroom based (first layer), through peer relationships (second layer) to the interaction of home and school (third layer), to illustrate their interlinking and often cumulative nature: classroom practices which exacerbate rather than mitigate cognitive or social anxiety; unsupportive student-teacher relationships; disjunct between home and institutional habitus; lack of

attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning; problematic peer relationships; concerns about social identity; marginalisation because of class or belonging to a counter-culture; poor home-school relationship; the privileging of academic pathways and middle-class aspirations; not seeing the relevance of school to life beyond it.

Many of these affect students from other social and ethnic groups. For each student there is a balance between risk and protective factors (Travers, 2017; Siraj, 2021). However, for white working-class students the risk factors often seem to outweigh the protective factors, leading to a high prevalence of fragile learner identities. This group can therefore be regarded as the canary in the mine, particularly sensitive to toxins in the education system; their experience can be read as a health check for the system. Significant changes are needed to improve the educational experience of students in this group and others. For example, a fundamental shift is needed in how the working-class are regarded and how middle-class values implicitly shape school. Broader notions of success and greater attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning would benefit a wide range of students, including those from middle-class backgrounds. It is to such implications that I now turn in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This research has generated insights which have the capacity to impact a real and pressing problem: the underachievement of white working-class students in a particular inner London borough. This borough is typical of those that have gone through a process of gentrification and now house rich and poor in close proximity. The findings are therefore relevant to similar urban places. However, I argue that they may also be relevant to white working-class communities in other locations, those which are not urban or multicultural or adjacent to wealth, and indeed to working-class groups of other ethnicities. This is because the research has shed light on fundamental problems with the current education system which affect a wide range of students. In this final chapter I will therefore draw together findings which relate specifically to the white working-class and make some broader comments about how their experience can be viewed as the canary in the mine – an indicator of dangers which are pertinent to others.

The first part of the chapter answers the research questions posed at the start of the thesis. This leads to the thorny issue of why white working-class students tend to attain less well than working-class students of other ethnicities. I apply Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis to offer an explanation which includes the field of employment as well as education. The second part of the chapter outlines the impact of my research in the borough where I completed the fieldwork. I then move on to discuss the limitations of the study. These include issues posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, how I have sought to resolve these within my thesis and the implications of those I could not. I conclude with some suggestions of directions for future research and a summary of the way in which this research has made an original contribution to knowledge.

Factors affecting the engagement and achievement of white working-class students in an inner London borough

White British FSM students have been the lowest performing group in terms of attainment and progress at KS2 and KS4 for many years (borough data 2010-22).

There is a large gap between this group and the borough average and between this and other FSM groups (ibid). Gaps widen particularly in secondary school. The local picture is echoed nationally (Strand, 2015; Education Select Committee, 2021). This research sought to understand the factors affecting engagement and achievement and was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values and ethos of three secondary schools in Burrington and how are they conveyed?
2. How do these values and ethos interact with white working-class identities and experiences of school?
3. What are the prevailing pedagogic practices in each school and how are they experienced by white working-class students?

I found that each of the three research schools placed a high value on academic attainment. In Schools A and B this led to an ethos in which academic attainment was privileged, working-class culture was implicitly judged, and the social and emotional aspects of learning were side-lined. This alienated some white working-class students and their families and contributed to disengagement with school. Disengagement was further exacerbated by discrepancies between official and felt ethos such that students did not trust that the school was acting in their best interests. In School C a more inclusive ethos led to wider notions of success and a greater sense of student belonging. In this school there was also more congruence between official and felt ethos, which increased student trust.

I agree with others (Ball, 2008/2013; Reay, 2017) that a narrow academic ethos is the result of a culture of performativity shaped by neoliberalism. Furthermore, I argue that changes in the field of education which emphasise the acquisition of canonical knowledge, put pressure on schools to secure results in high value academic subjects and limit financial resources, have prevented teachers and leaders from questioning the legitimacy of their priorities. Furthermore, the way in which a relentless focus on attainment and standards is presented under the guise of a moral purpose distracts schools from questioning underlying assumptions, such as the validity of meritocratic ideology and concomitant attitude to working-class culture.

References to the 'whole person' and respect for differences in schools' official ethos demonstrate that they know such values are important. However, practices in the field belie priorities and beliefs which are at odds with these espoused values.

Bourdieu's equation

$$[(\textit{habitus}) (\textit{capital})] + \textit{field} = \textit{practice}$$

can be expanded in an educational context as follows: a middle-class *habitus* interacts with institutional *capital* (made up of cultural capital and aspirations) in the *field* of the school to result in *practices* which privilege academic attainment and middle-class students and under-resource wider aspects of the educational experience such as the social and emotional aspects of learning and different notions of success.

These practices are enacted through symbolic violence for those students whose *habitus* does not match the field and who may be resistant (for various reasons) to enculturation. Suffering (and consequent disengagement or distrust) can be experienced by students who feel judged by a deficit view of working-class culture. Implicitly, their families have failed to achieve the social mobility lauded by the school system; their jobs are the manifestation of 'low aspirations'; and unemployment the result of personal failure.

Divergent cultural logics can also mean that working-class parenting practices are viewed as deficient rather than different (Lareau, 2003). This form of misrecognition renders some parents unintelligible to the school and prompts resentment for the role that has been cast for them, as seen in both Schools A (Leanne) and B (Billy). Even parents who subscribe to middle-class parenting practices can feel disempowered because their own level or experience of education makes it difficult to support homework tasks and engage in dialogue on an equal footing with teachers, as seen in the case of Liam's mother in School B. Fortunately, a more inclusive ethos and investment in the relationship between home and school can overcome these barriers as parents feel seen and valued and therefore empowered to work with the school to support their child's engagement, as seen in School C (Katie and Stella).

The most consistent finding in my research was about the importance of relationships; that between home and school, between peers and between student and teacher. These were the focus of Chapter 6. Although working-class students can experience a habitus-field mismatch which makes it harder to succeed at school, I found that a strong teacher-student relationship can help to align home and institutional habitus without compromising the working-class identity of the student and provide the tools and confidence to better navigate the field of school. Conversely, weak or problematic student-teacher relationships can widen the gap and alienate the student, prompting passivity and disengagement.

The relationship between teacher and student also mediates pedagogy and is therefore critical to the way that students engage in the classroom: when a student trusts that the teacher knows and cares for them, they are more likely to feel safe and try in the face of challenge. At the beginning of Chapter 7 I noted the prevalence of fragile learner identities in white working-class students and the correlation between a fragile learner identity and the relative absence of helpful learning behaviours. I showed how students' learner identities affect their learning behaviours and how classroom practice shapes these identities.

The way a student feels about themselves as a learner is also influenced by their habitus. This reciprocal feedback loop thus picks up on Bourdieu's idea that habitus is at once structuring and structured by. For middle-class students whose home habitus is governed by principles homologous to the institutional habitus, the process is mutually reinforcing (Warin, 2010). However, for working-class students who experience a mismatch, the process is more complicated and needs to be supported by pedagogies which build confidence, active participation and resourcefulness, in the context of a strong relationship with the teacher.

Such pedagogies correlate to the student-centred pedagogies found to support social justice. Whilst I saw these pedagogies in action in some classrooms and observed their beneficial power, I also found evidence to support Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen's (2012) suggestion that pedagogies of poverty are more prevalent in schools serving a high proportion of disadvantaged students and are exacerbated by an ethos which fixates on 'results' and values passive obedience above student agency. All three research questions come together in this finding

which traces the effect of ethos on pedagogy and consequently on white working-class students' experience of school. It draws attention to the irony that an education system which professes to be committed to reducing inequality by raising standards, creates a level of performance pressure that undermines teachers' ability to implement socially just pedagogies in the very schools that need them most.

The three research questions also come together in my discussion of peer relationships which begins in Chapter 6 and is extended in Chapter 8 to explore the impact of social identity on learner identity. School ethos influences the attention and resources given to the social and emotional aspects of learning. This is relevant to teacher-student relationships but also peer relationships, which are ever more influential in the teenage years. I noted that white working-class students are often drawn into tight knit monocultural friendship groups in part because of a shared habitus. Whilst students can support each other's academic engagement, more often these peer relationships reinforce negative attitudes and behaviour in ways which position them in opposition to school. The situation can prompt a clash of symbolic capitals which is played out on a continuum, from overt to covert. At one extreme is the counter-school culture of Willis's study (1977) in which students openly reject the academic capitals valued by school and invest in forms of social capital which involve behaviours and appearances condemned by school.

At the other end of the continuum, students like Reay's case study Shaun (2002) struggle to be simultaneously academically successful and maintain social credibility amongst peers for whom 'book work' is antithetical to their group identity. More of the students in my study fall into the latter category, perhaps because structural changes in the workforce have made getting a job more dependent on academic qualifications than in the past. For these students, their attempts to navigate the field of school are complicated by the need to secure a position which is advantageous in both the eyes of authority and their peers, using capitals which are valued differently by each group. This can give rise to passive learning behaviours which over time impact on students' learner identities and academic attainment, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 explored how the interaction between home and institutional habitus impacts learner identity in terms of aspirations and the relevance of school to life beyond it. Aspirations are shaped by habitus and yet the schools in my study do not

legitimate occupations which are traditionally seen as working-class. This can make it difficult for students to feel the relevance of school and thus to invest in securing academic qualifications, despite their importance these days to nearly all employment. For some of the working-class students in my study, this failure to legitimate their aspirations or provide a relevant curriculum amounts to symbolic violence and misrecognition; the system insists on the need for one form of capital and denies the value of another but does not acknowledge the arbitrary nature of these judgements. Instead, the academic pathway is presented as inherently superior and students and/or their families who do not secure acceptable academic qualifications are implicitly inferior. I argue that this produces a type of suffering which can manifest as disengagement or, in its extreme form, overt resistance.

The main manifestation documented in my study is disengagement and passivity, which I suggest is in part caused by the imposition of dominant values and the concurrent devaluation of working-class cultures. In a context where academic success is the main form of legitimated capital and to acquire it means mastering the cultural capital associated with the middle-class, it can be difficult to be successful whilst retaining what might be perceived as an authentic working-class identity. There is a psychosocial cost to adopting the habitus inculcated by school, which gives rise to distrust. Students in my study explicitly and implicitly question whether the school is serving their interests as keenly as its own need to secure a league table position within the neoliberal market. They also sense flaws in the notions of social mobility and meritocracy which the school system propounds. This contributes to the disengagement with school-based learning and subsequent underachievement which the research set out to investigate.

Why White British FSM students perform worse than ethnic minority FSM students

Many of the findings above may equally relate to working-class students of other ethnicities and intersect with discourses of racial inequality. The system can be seen to discriminate against students on the basis of both class *and* race in complex ways. However, local and national statistics show that the academic attainment of White British students is more adversely affected by Free School Meal status (a

proxy for poverty) than many ethnic minority groups. In 2019, White British FSM students had a GCSE Attainment 8 figure of 31.8 compared to FSM students from a Chinese ethnicity with 57.9, Indian ethnicity with 48.2 and Black African ethnicity with 42.3 (Education Select Committee, 2021). Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis can be used to understand this phenomenon. Given that students with lower levels of engagement and academic attainment tend to have a fragile learner identity, it also provides insight into the high prevalence of fragile learner identities in my sample.

Bourdieu uses the term hysteresis to refer to situations in which there is a habitus-field mismatch: the habitus of a person or group does not enable them to operate successfully in the current field. One of the manifestations of a hysteresis effect is a tendency to miss opportunities. This is because agents do not recognise the emergence of new field positions and therefore do not take action to secure them. Both the fields of employment and education have significantly changed over the last forty years. Employment has been transformed by technological advances; globalisation; the demise of traditional working-class industries and trade union power; and the rise of the knowledge economy, service industry and insecure employment conditions (such as zero-hour contracts) (Bottero, 2009). Education has become both standardised and fragmented; neoliberalism has given rise to a culture of performativity and belief in meritocracy which manifests as an excessive focus on academic results and pathways; teachers and students are under enormous and mutually reinforcing pressure.

It could be argued that parts of the white-working class have struggled to adjust to both sets of field change. This has led to various kinds of suffering such as mental health issues, unemployment and substance misuse which affect experiences in the field of education and work to create a vicious cycle: the intergenerational disadvantage referred to in the literature (Walkerdine, 2015) and anecdotally by the schools in my study. Indeed, in Burrington, White British FSM students are over-represented in NEET figures and mental health referrals. Ethnographic research into disaffected white working-class communities has often made links between employment, mental health and education (Bourdieu, 1999; Charlesworth, 1999; Evans, 2006; Wenham, 2020). In his study of a white working-class community in a northern deindustrialised city, Charlesworth (1999) notes the prevalence and

interrelated nature of unemployment, mental health issues and substance misuse. In a more recent study of a coastal town, Wenham (2020) explores the perspectives of White British disadvantaged young people, whose difficulties in education and employment contribute to a sense of having been 'left behind' whilst other parts of the country and social groups prosper.

Such instances of disaffection feed both victim and deficit discourses but are more accurately explained as the result of structural changes to employment. These changes make education more important since there is no longer the factory or manual labour market which can be entered without formal qualifications. However, the current education system is demanding and competitive and requires a different type of engagement and relationship than white working-class communities have traditionally had with schooling.

Research suggests that many immigrant groups see education as the key to social mobility and either bring with them a strong belief in the value of education or adopt it as a pragmatic route to improved life chances (Shah et al, 2010; Li in Khan, 2017). The middle-classes similarly value education (Lareau, 2003). However, the white working-class have a different historical relationship with the British education system. Generationally they have experienced a stratified system which has not served their needs and in which education has been largely irrelevant to employment. I argue that the habitus which has developed from these conditions does not sufficiently equip them to navigate the changed field of education or to take advantage of the new field positions which have appeared. There are some white working-class students who are taking full advantage of what the school system has to offer and subscribe to popular notions of social mobility. However, there are many who are struggling to see and engage with the value of this form of symbolic capital and to make it compatible with a habitus which is in some ways out of step with the times.

I argue that the extent to which a student, their family and peers perceive academic qualifications as a valuable form of capital which will help them secure an advantageous position in society, partly determines their levels of engagement with formal education. Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis therefore provides a way of thinking about why some social groups 'buy in' to education more than others. The

emphasis of neoliberal policy has been on equality of opportunity with the logic that if all children have access to high quality education the system is fair. However, *this fails to take account of people's differing attitudes towards and capacity to take up opportunity*. Such attitudes and capacities are historically rooted and arise not because of the deficits of particular cultures or 'low aspirations' but because of intergenerational experiences which give rise to orientations and current situations which may make it difficult to simply embrace opportunities as if from a clean slate.

Whilst white working-class people do not suffer racism, they come from a long history of classism and classification, often seen through binaries such as the deserving or undeserving poor, students who achieve or fail, engaged or hard to reach parents. Such labels are sticky and affect how people interact with the structures which implicitly attribute them. The students and parents in my study had all been labelled in one way or another by the school and/or society. Just as the achievement of black boys is negatively affected (Youdell, 2003) and Chinese students is positively affected by stereotypes (Archer & Francis, 2005) the strong pejorative discourses which often cling to white working-class students affect their attitude to education, particularly when undiluted by alternatives.

The fact that white working-class people do not have to contend with the significant challenges of racism means that they do benefit from their whiteness. Indeed, they benefit not just from the absence of a difficulty but from association with a globally powerful ethnicity. However, these advantages are not always straightforward. Being seen in relation to non-white groups who are more academically successful *despite* the additional barrier of racism can stoke unfavourable views. Fieldwork also revealed how role models become invisible for white working-class students. Participating teachers from a white working-class background explained how the process of becoming a teacher had shifted their class location and obscured their working-class roots such that students did not identify with and thereby see them as role models. In contrast, non-white teachers are visible as role models for ethnic minority students regardless of class. In this context, professional role models are therefore more visible for non-white than white working-class students. In such instances the intersection of race with class means that whiteness is not always a straightforward advantage.

However, this is not to say that the academic success of ethnic minority students or the presence of ethnic minority teachers are themselves detrimental to the educational achievement of white working-class students, as suggested by some of the discourses discussed in my introduction. Indeed, my research suggests that white working-class students benefit from diverse friendships and being in multicultural schools. This is an important riposte to those that suggest that the white working-class are losing out to multiculturalism. Concern about the underachievement of one ethnic group does not preclude a similar concern about others; in Burrington, Black Caribbean and White British FSM students are both identified as vulnerable groups in need of strategic support and work has been done to tackle racial and class bias alongside each other. As noted in a report on the London advantage (Ross, 2020), the attainment of White British FSM students is higher in London than in more monocultural settings. This is in part because of the range of different perspectives and attitudes that students are exposed to in such contexts. School C found that White British students supported to maintain more diverse friendships took up extra-curricular opportunities more readily and had a more positive attitude in the classroom than those in monocultural friendship groups in other cohorts (detail below). This can also be seen in the data from School A and B.

In that the students in my study all attended multicultural inner London schools which had been rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted and produced good exam results, they were in a more fortunate position than white working-class students in many other areas and schools. Indeed, borough statistics show that the White British FSM students these schools are more academically successful than those in less well functioning schools in the same area. In addition, whilst I have critiqued control oriented disciplinary and pedagogical practices and a narrow academic ethos, it is important to acknowledge that the high standards of behaviour for learning, good quality of teaching and aspirational ethos in these schools are beneficial. It is also important to emphasise that individual teachers are not to blame for the shortcomings I document. They are often constrained by larger structures or are well-meaning products of the system I critique.

However, I argue that it should be possible for White British FSM students to do as well as their peers in these schools and others. For this to happen, there needs to be a genuinely inclusive ethos which accords value to the working-class and more attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning. These adjustments are needed because structural and historical factors have made it harder for this group to engage with and access the opportunities represented by education. Fortunately, such adjustments have the capacity to benefit a wide range of students.

To summarise, my research explores the subtle processes of marginalisation which prompt white working-class students to disengage from formal education. At the heart of this is a mismatch between habitus and field and a misrecognition of capitals which is both layered by history and exacerbated by the present landscape. In that it is about class discrimination, the findings are relevant to working-class groups of other ethnicities. However, *the particularly precarious nature of the relationship between white working-class communities and the education system makes them more sensitive to its shortcomings*. Hence the suggestion that they are the canaries in the mine which should alert us to dangers which also compromise the safety of others. In an educational context, such safety includes mental health, intellectual curiosity, academic attainment, social ease and enjoyment. The issues faced by this group may not be unique to them, but perhaps their vulnerable position in other ways means that they are one of the more obvious victims of a dysfunctional system.

A realisation that there are imbalances which need to be redressed can be seen in the recent revisions to the Ofsted framework which call for a broad and balanced curriculum and greater attention to student and staff well-being. However, shifting the emphasis of what is measured alone is not enough; it will merely feed a damaging culture of performativity. Movements such as New ERA Assessment and the Times Education Commission signal that there is an appetite for more fundamental change. These developments are welcome but must be heard and actioned by government.

Government ministers also need to let go of the illusion that it is the responsibility of education to create a more equal society, rather than confront the more uncomfortable changes needed to economic policy to create equality of condition. When people have secure employment and housing and well-resourced support for mental and physical health, they are in a much better position to take up the

opportunities presented by the education system. And when schools are supported to critically engage with perceptions of working-class culture and the unquestioning pursuit of flawed meritocratic ideals, they will be in a better position to meet the needs of students from working-class backgrounds. Conducive material conditions and mental attitudes are needed for both staff and students to nurture engagement and achievement. What happens in schools can make a difference, as I demonstrate in the next section. But without these larger structural and ideological changes, white working-class students and other marginalised groups will continue to struggle.

Impact (see Appendix G for timeline)

This research was part commissioned by the borough to gain insight and find solutions to a real problem. As explained in Chapter 4, in addition to three school specific reports, I therefore wrote a borough report which collated the findings from all three schools and made five recommendations:

1. Schools should seek to broaden the sense of what is valued and to think carefully about how these messages are conveyed.
2. Schools need to invest in relationships and to see the social and emotional aspects of learning as of equal importance to the quality of teaching.
3. Schools need to pay attention to learner identity and how both school-wide and student-specific strategies can be put in place to strengthen it.
4. Schools should direct attention to particularly relevant aspects of teaching and learning and engage in sharing good practice and/or rethinking practices as appropriate.
5. Schools should make changes to careers advice and guidance practices so that students are supported to consider, discuss and pursue a wide range of careers.

I also produced a summary leaflet of 'Dos and Don'ts' based on these recommendations (see Appendix E), modelled on one by the Best Practice In Grouping study (Francis et al, 2019), to help communicate findings in an accessible way most likely to have an impact.

My intention was to deliver a presentation at a Headteachers' meeting to explain the recommendations, hand out the leaflet and refer people to the longer report. I had arranged for Becky Taylor to do this for the Best Practice in Grouping study in 2019 and headteachers said they wanted more such research-based sessions. In response I organised a programme of presentations by academics from the IOE on relevant topics and scheduled mine as part of this. However, the pandemic interrupted these plans and when meetings resumed the content was driven by emergency pandemic recovery priorities and the programme of research presentations was put aside. Dissemination of my research was therefore in a more ad hoc way than planned. I will explain the response of each participating school and then the broader impact to date.

The link senior leader at School A had been very engaged with the recommendations I shared (in July 2019) before I wrote the school specific report. He was due to take up headship of the school and said that many of the suggestions were congruent with ideas he had already entertained. However, when I sent the school specific report in January 2020, he did not share it with staff or respond to me. The staff who had participated in the research very much wanted to see the findings but since I had promised confidentiality to the SLT link person, I could not send them the school report myself. Instead, I waited until I could send them the borough report and summary leaflet (designed for a wider audience). These were ready in March 2021 and sent to all participating staff at this point.

The pandemic meant that it was difficult to follow up communication about the research because staff were under such stressful conditions. However, at a headteachers' meeting in March 2022 the head of School A presented on changes he had made in the school and their impact. These included making the behaviour policy more reward than punishment oriented, celebrating broader notions of success and nurturing relationships, all of which were resonant with my recommendations. He reported marked improvements in the engagement and achievement of groups such as White British FSM students. I cannot assert cause and effect, but my research findings may have provided the evidence he needed to proceed with ideas or nudged him towards actions which have had a positive impact on White British FSM students, and potentially others.

I sent the school specific report to the link SLT person at School B at the height of the pandemic in July 2020 and we had an engaging conversation about it shortly afterwards. However, when I contacted him again in May 2021 it was unclear whether he had ever shared the report with the headteacher or acted on the recommendations. He then left the school in July 2021. The school discontinued the practice of covering KS3 lessons in order to deploy these teachers for extra KS4 teaching once I pointed out the impact on engagement for the younger students. There have also been changes to student reading for pleasure practices in the school which are in line with the recommendations I made in the school specific report. I do not know of any others. However, recent contact with one of the focus group teachers, who has now shared the recommendations with a new member of SLT, may prompt further discussion and action.

When I sent the school specific report to the link person at School C in September 2020, she passed it on to the person responsible for pupil premium students and we met online as a group of three. The discussion was positive, but action was delayed by the pandemic. When I sent the borough report in March 2021 it acted as a reminder. The SLT person responsible for pupil premium students was full of enthusiasm for the report and set about using the recommendations as the basis of the pupil premium action plan. She had worked with predominantly White British FSM students in her previous school and was excited by the 'lightbulb moments' my report prompted in her understanding and ideas for actions. She therefore set up meetings with groups of staff relevant to each area she wanted to focus on: peer relationships, teaching and learning, and careers advice and guidance.

In July 2022, I spoke to the member of SLT responsible for pupil premium students and the person taking on this role from September to discuss impact and next steps. Whilst not all the actions planned have been completed, there has been significant progress in relation to peer relationships, which was a key area for improvement in School C where white working-class girls had tended to form toxic monocultural friendship groups. Support for making and maintaining healthy friendships during the summer school and throughout the year have resulted in White British FSM students being much more integrated in terms of diverse friendships than in previous years.

Staff feel that this has led to a greater take up of extra-curricular activities and positive attitudes to learning. The careers advisor has also ensured a wider representation of careers at events and work has begun on the PSHE curriculum to support broader validation. The person taking over this SLT role is keen to meet in September to continue dialogue and maintain progress.

These three responses are in keeping with the leadership style of each school. The senior leader at School A kept tight control over the report. Although recommendations have been implemented, they were done so without dialogue or acknowledgement. At school B, there was a similar lack of dialogue and possibly no receptivity to approaches not congruent with the focus on discipline and control. School C was open to ideas, engaged in dialogue, has made various changes and reflected on impact.

In addition to the reports and 'Dos and Don'ts' leaflet, I designed a 'diagnostic framework' for one-to-one use with students in need of additional support to identify strengths and areas for development (see Appendix F). This can be used with students from any background; as argued previously, many issues affecting White British FSM students are applicable to others. The framework is accompanied by guidance about how it should be used and a worked example which emphasises the dialogic and agentic aspects of the process and is intended to stop it being used as a tick box exercise. The framework was taken on by School C where it has been used to structure mentoring conversations. It is also being used by another school (which I will call D) who did not participate in the study but expressed interest after I mentioned the research at a Deputy Heads' meeting in October 2021.

School D has reported significant impact: 100% of the 20 students using the framework have demonstrated improvement in their academic attainment. When I met initially with a mentor from this school to explain the process, she said that she recognised the risk and protective factors which structure the framework from her own schooling experience as a Black Caribbean student and from her work with many students from that demographic in her current role. This comment reinforced my sense that the findings are relevant to marginalised groups beyond the white working-class.

Finally, as part of the council school improvement strategy, a series of 'delivery plans' have been written to guide work with schools. One of these is entitled 'Vulnerable groups' and concerns the two lowest achieving groups in the borough: Black Caribbean and White British FSM. The recommendations from my research are included in this document which may help to raise awareness and embed actions more widely across the borough.

I have presented at several conferences and plan to publish from this research to reach a wider audience. Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic the research findings have therefore had a reasonable impact to date and there is potential for further impact both within the borough and beyond.

Limitations

An important limitation to acknowledge is that created by my employment as an educational consultant in the borough where I did the fieldwork. This limited my objectivity because of the prior relationship I had with each of the three schools. As discussed in Chapter 4, I took various steps to mitigate against this situation, such as maintaining a reflexive practice throughout and separating my role as consultant and researcher as much as possible. However, the study is different to one carried out by a complete outsider.

The Covid-19 pandemic created another set of limitations. First, and most importantly, it impeded my ability to feedback to participants, particularly students and parents. Given that part of the aim of the research was to empower participants by providing space for them to 'talk back' to the system, this was disappointing. I would have liked to engage in dialogue to know what students and parents thought of the findings and to demonstrate that their contributions had led to recommendations which may have real impact.

Another limitation is that the pandemic may have changed society and education sufficiently to invalidate or undermine my findings. For example, the pandemic may have had an impact on home-school relationships and students' attitude to school. Research done in the wake of the pandemic (A. Bradbury et al., 2022) has suggested an increased awareness of the importance of the social and emotional aspects of learning, including relationships, which supports my findings. However, without repeating or extending the research, it cannot be known which findings are now more valid and which may be less. In May 2021 I did try to do some follow up interviews with the students who had participated in the study to find out about their experience of the pandemic and how it had affected their education. However, the challenges facing staff and students meant that this was not possible: the link SLT members either did not respond to my request or they reported that students had not responded.

Finally, the pandemic will make it difficult to evaluate the impact of the recommendations in schools which adopt them. This is because it will be difficult to disentangle the effect of the pandemic from that of the strategies. For example, if the gap between the GCSE results of White British FSM and the school average increases in School C (where the recommendations have been implemented most fully) it will be impossible to know whether the actions have been ineffective or whether the impact of the pandemic has been sufficiently severe for this group that it outweighs improvements at school level. There has been a significant increase in both persistent absence and families choosing elective home education across the borough, with White British students overrepresented in both figures. Global anxiety/mental health issues are the most common reason. This is likely to have a significant impact on educational engagement and attainment, beyond the reach of the recommendations from my research.

I have chosen to write the thesis largely without reference to the pandemic to maintain the integrity of my findings as they were when the research was done. I have mentioned it only in places where it has a direct bearing on my argument, for example to support the importance of the social and emotional aspects of learning. I have therefore managed to resolve the limitations posed by the pandemic within the thesis but acknowledge that further research is needed to evaluate the validity of my

findings in a post-pandemic educational world. The attainment of white working-class students was an immediate focus in press coverage of the first set of national examination results in three years (Woolcock, 2022), which demonstrates that it continues to be a significant issue in need of scrutiny.

Directions for future research

In addition to understanding how the pandemic has affected students in the white working-class communities where I did my fieldwork, it would be interesting to investigate white working-class groups in other, non-urban locations and ascertain to what extent my findings hold true for them. Such place-based research could shed light on factors common across white working-class groups and those which are influenced by location.

Equally, the day spent with the second-generation Albanian student in my pilot study and a member of staff's comments that students with this heritage have 'a totally different mindset' to White British students who have been here for generations, has also prompted an interest in researching 'Other White' groups and their experience of education. Such a study may invite comparison of different experiences of whiteness and enable an evaluation of the impact of generational history on current attitudes to education. It would also be interesting to consider the educational trajectories of European 'Other White' groups in post-Brexit Britain.

Finally, Vincent has done some important work on different fractions of middle-class parents in relation to education, for example noting the correlation between parental agency and occupation (2001). It would be interesting to similarly investigate different fractions of the working-class, particularly the impact that employment status has on students' engagement with school. Linked to this is an interest in the possibility of schools acting as community hubs for training and employment opportunities. As a council employee and parent at a local primary school, I have acted as informal link between parents and council services and think a piece of action research which formalised the links between schools and local services would be of value.

My contribution to knowledge

Empirical contribution

This research has collected a large dataset which provides rich insight into the various ways in which white working-class students are marginalised by the current secondary school system. Previous empirical research into this group has focused on their interaction with education before the 1988 Education Act (Willis, 1977) and before the education reforms of the current government (Evans, 2006, Ingram 2009). This research investigates the effects of more recent policies and thereby makes an original contribution to the literature. The focus on white working-class boys and girls distinguishes it from research which has focused solely on white-working class boys (Stahl, 2017), black working-class students (Youdell, 2003) and working-class girls of various ethnicities (Hollingworth and Archer, 2007; Skeggs, 1997).

Previous work has demonstrated that a culture of performativity acts to narrow the curriculum and privilege the academic (Ball, 2008; Sopher, 2016). This research corroborates these findings but also shows how it is possible for secondary schools to resist such pressures by creating a more genuinely inclusive ethos and investing resources in the social and emotional aspects of learning. My research demonstrates that this is an effective way to reduce the gap between official and felt ethos documented by others (Donnelly, 2000; Graham, 2012).

This research investigates how secondary school practices and pedagogies work to make fragile rather than strengthen the learner identities of white working-class students and how this prompts the disengagement which is instrumental to their underachievement. It builds on previous research which established the effects of 'pedagogies of poverty' on primary aged children (Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Cremin et al, 2014) and the importance of the social and emotional aspects of learning (Warin, 2010). My research is original in its specific focus on the effects of current classroom and whole school practices on one of the lowest attaining socioeconomic and ethnic groups at secondary level.

Conceptual contribution

Bourdieu's conceptual tools have been used by many academics to analyse processes of social reproduction and marginalisation in both primary and secondary education. I have made an original contribution to this field in my perception of how Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis can be used to answer the long-standing question of why white FSM students attain lower than FSM students from other ethnicities. In doing so I have added theoretical weight to the assertion of others that equality of opportunity is not enough.

My research demonstrates how a range of doxic policies and practices serve to exacerbate the very gaps they are designed to narrow. This builds on the work of others who document how practices such as ability setting and zero-tolerance behaviour policies constitute forms of symbolic violence (Archer et al, 2018; Francis et al, 2019; Kulz, 2017), how misrecognition can marginalise students from certain socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Hollingworth, 2015) and the effects of dissonance between home and institutional habitus (Reay, 1998; Stahl, 2013).

My contribution is use Bourdieu's theoretical tools to suggest how some of these effects may be mitigated. I demonstrate how schools need to find ways to help students develop social capital which supports rather than undermines engagement with school and academic success. For example, through investing in student-teacher relationships which mitigate against a habitus mismatch and nurturing healthy peer relationships.

I also use Bourdieu's tools to explain why solutions can be difficult for schools to perceive. Like others I suggest that schools should legitimate a wider range of aspirations but frame current practices as a form of misrecognition which results from the doxic conflation of institutional habitus with the middle-class habitus of key actors. I show that this is one of several ways in which the system makes fragile the learner identities of white working-class students even whilst the neoliberal emphasis on individual culpability and meritocracy obscures the structuring force of the education system.

An intersectional approach allows me to show how the social historical position of white working-class students make them particularly vulnerable to flaws in the current system. I suggest that they can thus be regarded as the canary in the mine which should alert us to dangers relevant to students from other groups. In this way I contribute to understanding the underachievement of white working-class students and others in similar circumstances.

Practical contribution

My research has already made a practical contribution to secondary education in Burrington through the school specific reports for each of the participating schools and the dissemination of a borough report which collated findings and made a series of practical recommendations. These recommendations aim to help schools reduce marginalisation, strengthen students' learner identities and support students to see school as relevant and enjoyable. In the report I have identified aspects of pedagogy so that professional development can be targeted at practices which will make the most difference to working-class students. The recommendations about relationships have the capacity to strengthen teacher-student and home-school relationships and to make peer relationships supportive of educational achievement rather than to undermine it.

In addition, I have created a diagnostic framework for one-to-one use with students in need of additional support which has already helped to make mentoring conversations positive and prompted changes which have increased engagement and attainment.

The research has enabled me to work in a consultative capacity with interested schools to refine and evaluate their practices in relation to white working-class engagement and achievement. Conversations have helped teachers and leaders to perceive flaws in current provision and engage with solutions which may positively impact both white working-class students and others. Plans for further dissemination have the potential to make a practical contribution to schools and students elsewhere.

Closing remarks

In my opening chapter, I detailed the various discourses surrounding the white working-class. Anxieties about immigration continue to fuel the idea that White British people, particularly the working-class, are losing out to multiculturalism. Neoliberal policies continue to find fault with the individual and so support a deficit view of the working-class rather than look at problems bred by neoliberal ideology itself. My research builds on the work of others to demonstrate the fallacy of these ways of thinking and identify the deeper structural and historical reasons for underachievement. It also exposes the dangers of a high-pressure culture of performativity for both teachers and students. The teachers are at risk of being blinded or frustrated and students stressed or disengaged. The education system is not in a healthy state for anyone but, as often happens with societal weaknesses, it is those who are in the least advantageous position who lose the most, as starkly illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research process has enabled at least some local schools to engage in productive dialogue to question perceptions and pave the way for practices which are more supportive of the engagement and achievement of white working-class students and other marginalised groups. I hope this interest will grow beyond my borough and that in time there will be demonstrable impact in enough schools to encourage greater critical engagement with the issues at stake and therefore more fundamental change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information sheet (example)

Participant Information Sheet for Secondary Pupils (tracked)

UCL Research Ethics Committee Approval ID Number: Z6364106/2018/04/162

You are being asked to take part in a research project into the educational experiences of White British pupils in Burrington secondary schools.

What is the project's purpose?

It is important that all pupils have a fair chance of being successful and enjoying school. Schools and researchers sometimes look at the experiences of particular groups of pupils to make sure they are doing as well as possible. This research project is looking at White British pupils as a group to find out more about their experiences of education and how things might be improved.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a White British pupil in Year 7 or 10 in School X.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. You can withdraw at any point up to one month after the last interview, without giving a reason. If you decide to withdraw you will be asked what you want to happen to any information you have provided up to that point.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do decide to take part I will be in your lessons for two school days in separate terms in order to build up a picture of what learning is like for you. I will not be with you during break or lunch times and I will not be dependent on you to get from

lesson to lesson. I will not necessarily sit with you. It is up to you whether other pupils know that I am focusing on you or not.

I will talk with you on a one to one basis at the end of each day. This conversation is to help me check my interpretation of what I have seen. I may ask you to think back to particular lessons and tell me about whether you enjoyed or did not enjoy specific moments or tasks or what you thought about particular experiences.

Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The one to one interview will be audio recorded but no one but me will listen to the recording. When I have listened to it enough to take notes, it will be destroyed. All notes will be stored securely.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking part?

The disadvantages of taking part are as follows: you may miss a lesson for the interview; at first, you may feel a bit self-conscious about me being in your lessons; if you have chosen for other pupils to link my presence to you, they might ask you questions about the experience.

The advantages of taking part are as follows: you will have the opportunity to tell and show someone about what learning is like for you at this school; your thoughts, feelings and opinions will be listened to and taken seriously; you may help bring about some positive changes to how you and others experience school.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information I collect about you will be kept strictly confidential. If I use any of your words or comments in any reports or publications, your name will not be used and measures will be taken to make sure that you are not identifiable.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The day in lessons with you and interviews are part of a larger research project. The results of the project will be presented to each participating school and an overall report will be presented to Burrington Council. In addition, the results will be made available to everyone who has taken part – pupils, parents and teachers – through a

presentation and hand-out within a year of the end of the project. Your name will be changed but there is a possibility that your parents or teachers might be able to work out what you said.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). Your personal data will be processed for the purpose outlined in this notice on the provision of your consent.

Contact for further information

Emma Simpson: Emma.simpson.17@ucl.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information and for considering taking part in this research study.

Appendix B: Consent form (example)

Title of study: The engagement and achievement of White British pupils

Pupil Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete this consent form and return to Emma Simpson in person or at the address below.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.		
I agree to be observed in my lessons for up to two days.		
I agree to be interviewed on a one to one basis by Emma Simpson at the end of each of these days.		
I agree that these interviews will be audio taped. I understand that the recordings will only be listened to by Emma Simpson and that they will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed (written out).		
I understand that all personal information about me will remain confidential.		
I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, they will be anonymised, and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I am not identifiable.		
I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any point up to the end of the data collection period, without giving a reason. If I do withdraw, I will be given an option about whether I want any data I have contributed to be used or not.		

I understand that I can contact Emma Simpson at any time during the data collection period and request for my data to be removed from the project database.		
I understand that any data relating to me will be stored securely.		
I understand that the results of the project will be shared, in an anonymous form, with the school management team and Burrington Council.		
I understand that the overall results of the research will be made available to me via an oral presentation and hand-out within a year of its completion.		

Appendix C: Case study note taking template for focus group teachers

Weekly note taking template for case study pupil

Name of teacher:

Today's date:

What has been the focus of learning in your lesson with the class this week?

Have you done anything or set up any learning experiences in a way which has engaged the student this week? How did you know they were engaged?

Have you done anything or set up any learning experiences in a way which has prompted disengagement? How did you know they were disengaged?

What do you think your case study pupil has learnt this week? Please think about actual learning, not just lesson objectives.

Are there any other comments to make about your case study pupil, or yourself, for this week? Eg. absences, incidents, moods, achievements, difficulties, progress, social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning

Appendix D: Interview schedules (all)

Interview Schedule for Teacher Focus Group Session 1

Warm up question: how long have you worked at this school?

1. What do you feel is valued in this school? What do you feel that teachers/ leaders /students think is important? How do you know?
2. How do you think these values impact on White British Disadvantaged students? Are they shared by these students? Are they experienced by these students?
3. What do you think about the communication between staff and students and between staff and parents or members of the local community? What are relationships like? Is this general picture similar for White British Disadvantaged students and their parents/carers, or are there differences?
4. How would you describe the pedagogical approaches used in most lessons? For example, is there a lot of teacher talk? Do students do a lot of pair and group tasks or mostly work individually? Do students do a lot of writing? If so, what type and for how long? How are texts used and accessed? Are there common formulae or must haves across the subjects or does teaching style vary a lot between subjects?
5. How do the pedagogical approaches we've talked about impact on White British Disadvantaged students? What helps them engage and what seems to hinder their learning?
6. Are there factors other than those we have talked about which you feel help or hinder the engagement and achievement of White British Disadvantaged students?

7. How do you think the school tries to meet the needs of these students? What is or is not working? What else might help?

8. If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing which would impact on how White British Disadvantaged students engage and achieve, what would it be?

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me or ask at this stage?

Interview Schedule Teacher Focus Group Session 2

1. Welcome and warm up: questions to the group in general. (5 mins)
2. Individual feedback: each person has 3-5 minutes to report back on their experience in response to the main question below. The others listen carefully without interrupting but can jot down any questions. (20 mins)
3. Discussion: when everyone has spoken, there is a general discussion for 20 minutes in response to what has been said. This incorporates the group discussion question. (20 mins)
4. Forward thinking: individually people think, jot down and speak in response to the final question. (5 mins)
5. Close: a reminder of the date for the next session and a chance to ask questions (5 mins)

Warm up question:

Did you manage to make weekly case study notes? How did you find this process?

Main question for each person to answer individually:

What issues or insights emerged from the process of taking case study notes?

Prompts: did you notice any particular barriers for your student? Did you notice any particular enablers? Did you have any other insights into their educational experience? Did you have any insights into your own approach to, or thoughts about, this student?

Group discussion question:

What issues or insights seem to be emerging for us as a group? Prompts: what do the experiences have in common and how are they different?

Individual question:

Is there anything you want to do more of over the next term in order to improve engagement and achievement for your case study student? Is there anything you want to do less of over the next term?

Close

I remind everyone of the date for the third and final meeting and the expectation that everyone will take weekly case study notes as before in the interim.

Are there any questions or anything that anyone would like to say before we finish?

NB For pilot study ask the following instead of the close above. Could also ask staff to respond to these questions on paper: What was helpful or unhelpful about the template? What was helpful or unhelpful about taking weekly notes? Do you have any ideas for improvement to the template or instructions for use? What did you think worked or did not work about the focus group session we have just had? Any ideas for improvement?

Interview Schedule Teacher Focus Group Session 3

1. Welcome and warm up: questions to the group in general. (5 mins)
2. Individual feedback: each person has 3-5 minutes to report back on their experience in response to the main question below. The others listen carefully without interrupting but can jot down any questions. (20 mins)
3. Discussion: when everyone has spoken, there is a short general discussion in response to what has been said. This incorporates the group discussion question. (10 mins)
4. Forward thinking: individually people think, jot down and speak in response to the final question. Short discussion (15 mins)
5. Close: thanks for taking part, information about dissemination, a chance to ask questions (5 mins)

Warm up question:

Did you manage to make weekly case study notes? How did you find the process this time?

Main question for each person to answer individually:

What issues or insights emerged from the process of taking case study notes this time? Prompts: did you notice any particular barriers for your student? Did you notice any particular enablers? Did you have any other insights into their educational experience? Did you have any insights into your own approach to, or thoughts about, this student?

Group discussion question:

What issues or insights seem to be emerging for us as a group? Prompts: what do the experiences have in common and how are they different?

Individual question, which gives way to group discussion:

What do you think should be the next steps for improving the engagement and achievement of White British Disadvantaged students at this school? Is there anything that you would like to do personally, as a department or as a school?

Close

I thank everyone for taking part and remind them of the plans to disseminate the findings of the whole project.

Are there any questions or anything that anyone would like to say before we finish?

Interview schedule for student focus group

1. What do you feel is valued in this school? What do teachers and leaders seem to think is important? How do you know? What do students value? How do you know? (probe for behaviour and attitudes, concepts such as honesty, beliefs about life outside school such as careers).
2. How would you describe your relationships with teachers and leaders? (probe for communication, support, approachability, respect)
3. What do you think about the way that teachers and leaders communicate with your family or members of your community?
4. What lessons do you like and why?
5. What do teachers do that helps you to learn? What do other people around you do that helps you learn?
6. What lessons don't you like and why?
7. What do teachers do which gets in the way of your learning? What do other people around you do which gets in the way of your learning?
8. How have your experiences of school this academic year been similar or different to last year?
9. What do you want to do with your life? How does the school support you in these aims?
10. If you could wave a magic wand and make a change to improve your learning experiences at school, what would that change be?
11. Is there anything else which you would like to say or ask at this point?

Interview schedule for tracked student - end of tracked day

1. In general, how was the day for you? Would you rate it as a good day, a bad day, or in between? Was it better than usual or not? Why? How?
2. Were there any particular moments when you were enjoying your learning? What made it enjoyable?
3. Which lesson do you think you learnt most in today? Why? What did you learn?
4. Can you put the lessons from today in the order of the ones you enjoyed most to least, or the ones you learnt most to least in.
5. Were there any particular moments when you were not enjoying your learning? Why was it not enjoyable?
6. Which lesson do you think you learnt least in today? Why?
7. Do you think you tend to learn more or less than other students? What makes you say that?
8. I've got a few moments and interpretations I'd like to check with you. I was interested in X lesson when Y happened. Can you remember that moment? Can you tell me what was going on for you then? My interpretation was Z? Does that feel right or wrong to you?
9. [End of Day 1: How did it feel having me in all of your lessons? If we do another day, is there anything you would like to change to improve the experience for you?]
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about today's lessons, or are there any questions you would like to ask?

Interview schedule for parents

1. What made you choose this school? What do you think of it now that your son/daughter is here?
2. How do you feel your son/daughter is getting on at school? Are they doing as well as you think they should be doing?
3. Have you noticed any changes (positive or negative) in your son/daughter since they started this year (new key stage)? What do you think are the reasons for these changes?
4. What do you think helps your son/daughter to enjoy and be successful at school? What do you think gets in the way of their enjoyment and success?
5. How would you describe your own experience of school?
6. What do you think of the way the school communicates with you? Probes:
does the school communicate with you via phone, text, letter or in person?
What do you like or dislike about the way the school communicates with you?
7. What do you think the school believes is important? Do you share these values?
8. If you could wave a magic wand and change something to improve your son/daughter's experience of school, what would it be?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say? Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Interview schedule for senior leader

Warm up questions about context

- How long have you worked at this school?
- What are your main areas of responsibility?

Ethos and values

- How would you describe the ethos and values of the school?
- How are these values conveyed to the students?
- To what extent do you think these values are shared by students?

White British Disadvantaged students

As we know, White British Disadvantaged students do not seem to do as well as their peers in this school (as is the case in many other schools).

- What do you feel are the main reasons for underachievement here?
- Do you feel that anything has changed over time or has the situation remained similar to how it was five or more years ago?
- What is the school doing to address the underachievement of this group?
- To what extent do you feel that these measures are successful?

Magic wand question

- If you could wave a magic wand, what would you change to help make White British Disadvantaged pupils more engaged and successful?

Closing questions

- Are there any other comments you would like to make?
- Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Appendix E: Dos and Don'ts leaflet

Context

In 2019, research was carried out in three secondary schools to find out about what helps and hinders the engagement and achievement of White British students. The research involved:

- 60 students
- 20 members of staff
- 7 parents
- Focus groups and one-to-one interviews
- Observing 24 students through 1-2 days of lessons
- 51 interviews in total

Although the research focused on White British students, many of the recommendations would help all students.

Institute of Education

Finding 1: School Ethos

School ethos (what is valued by the school) affects students' experiences and engagement. An overly narrow academic focus is not appealing to all students. A genuinely broad and inclusive ethos increases a sense of belonging. Students are more likely to feel that the school is working in their best interests when a range of skills and attributes are valued. There is sometimes a gap between the official school ethos (what the school believes about itself) and students' lived experience.

- Do: invest in and celebrate achievement in the arts, sports and practical subjects
- Do: develop and celebrate interpersonal skills such as kindness
- Do: consider what values are conveyed in the way that resources are distributed and what is celebrated
- Do: find ways to hear about students' experiences and consider how they match up with the school's intentions
- Don't: focus resources on core subjects such as maths, English and science to the detriment of other subjects

Finding 2: Relationships

Relationships are extremely important. They affect how a student feels during school and the quality of interactions they have with those around them. If a student feels happy and secure both in and outside of lessons, they are in a better position to learn effectively.

Students respond best to **teachers** who they feel care about their learning and well-being, who see them as individuals and with whom they share a human connection. This includes clear and firm boundaries, motivated by care rather than power.

Peer dynamics can create problems and be a source of anxiety. Peer conflict and peer pressure can distract students from learning and undermine their enjoyment of school. However, friendships also have the capacity to support students to achieve and be happy.

Parents/carers need to feel able to contact key members of staff and develop consistent relationships. The change from primary to secondary school is significant for parents/carers as well as for their children and there are barriers to access which the school needs to consider.

- Do: enable staff to feel that investing in relationships with students is as important as providing high quality teaching. Reflect this in staff training and allocation of time.
- Do: provide explicit support to help students make, maintain and navigate healthy friendships with as wide a range of peers as possible.
- Do: consider how welcoming and accessible the school and staff feel to parents.
- Do: provide opportunities for parents to engage in dialogue about the milestones and challenges of each year (rather than giving information in a one-way format).

Institute of Education

White British student engagement and achievement

Finding 3: Learner Identity

Learner identity is the way that a student feels about themselves as a learner. It affects confidence, resilience and concentration. There is a continuum from fragile to strong. Like mindset, people can have a different learner identity in different subjects. If someone has a fragile learner identity it can manifest externally (for example through behaviour issues) or internally (for example through withdrawal).

There are lot of ways to strengthen learner identity such as: skilful teaching; a broad curriculum offer; extra-curricular participation; increasing choice and agency; support for independent study; well managed intervention; nurturing supportive peer dynamics; investment in KS3; developing a healthy reading culture; re-evaluating setting practices; maximising positive parental influence.

- Do: consider a student's learner identity and how it can be strengthened through school wide and student specific strategies.
- Do: re-consider setting practices (see 'Best Practice in Grouping Students' research, 2018, UCL)
- Do: think about what extra-curricular opportunities are on offer, when sessions take place and possible barriers to participation
- Do: invest in KS3, the social and emotional aspects of learning and a broad curriculum offer.

Finding 4: Teaching and Learning

High quality teaching and learning is crucial for engagement and achievement. Four aspects are particularly important:

- Do: create safe classroom environments where students feel able to ask for clarification and make mistakes
- Do: make sure that students are active in their learning
- Do: consider how support is provided in both mainstream lessons and intervention
- Do: consider how to make English and maths more enjoyable

Finding 5: Careers advice and guidance

High quality careers advice and guidance can help students feel the relevance of school and increase motivation. However, there is often a mismatch between what schools believe they are providing and students' experience. For example, many students know what job they would like to do (from architect to beautician) but do not feel supported to realise these ambitions.

- Do: prepare students for careers events and provide space to talk about them afterwards.
- Do: find out the full range of what students want to do and invite in people to speak or lead workshops from these professions.
- Do: support work experience where possible.
- Do: encourage teachers to make clear how their subject is relevant to particular careers.

Researcher: Emma Simpson (emma.simpson.17@ucl.ac.uk) Education, Practice and Society Department within UCL IOE.

Appendix F: Diagnostic Framework

Diagnostic framework for students in need of additional support

Guidance for use of the framework

This framework should be used to develop a supportive action plan for students who are struggling to engage with and achieve in school. The protective and risk factors were identified in the course of research into the engagement and achievement of White British Pupil Premium students and therefore pertain particularly to this group of students. However, they are also relevant to others. This diagnostic framework could therefore be used for various students in need of additional support.

The framework should be completed in dialogue with the student, their parent/carer and relevant teachers. It identifies what protective and risk factors are in place and helps to prioritise action accordingly. It is important to strengthen protective factors as well as to mitigate against risk factors so any action plan should contain a mixture of such measures.

There are five sections: personal characteristics; relationships; school values; in lessons; and outside lessons. In each section are a series of statements which can be regarded as on a continuum, from protective to risk factor. For example, good attendance is a protective factor, whilst poor attendance is a risk factor. The student may be anywhere along the line from one end of the continuum to the other. For each statement, mark (X) roughly where the student currently is.

There are likely to be discrepancies between where different stakeholders place an X for some statements. These should be regarded as potentially fruitful and interesting rather than problematic. For example, the school may feel that they listen to students well whilst the student in question does not feel listened to. If the same piece of paper or electronic version is used for multiple conversations, make sure that the student has input first so that they are not influenced by the marks of other stakeholders. The conversations should take place with a trusted member of staff so that the student or parent feels they can be as honest as possible.

Review the completed framework to identify which protective factor could be strengthened and which risk factor could be addressed in each section. Decisions should be informed by the student's preferences and likely impact of intervention/support. A worked example is available for reference.

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Protective Factors	Degree	Risk Factors
Personal Characteristics		Personal Characteristics
Clear aspirations	←————→	Vague aspirations
Good attendance	←————→	Poor attendance
Positive attitude	←————→	Problematic attitude to school
Good behaviour	←————→	Problematic behaviour
Good literacy skills	←————→	Literacy issues
Robust learner identity (how a student feels about themselves as a learner)	←————→	Fragile learner identity
Confident and resilient	←————→	Lacks confidence and resilience
Mentally healthy	←————→	Mental health issues
Actions		

Relationships	Relationships
Parent/carer has good relationship with school	Parent/carer has problematic relationship with school
Strong student teacher relationships	Weak or problematic student teacher relationships
Positive peer relationships	Peer relationships which exert a negative influence
Actions	

School Values	School Values
Broad curriculum which values arts and non-academic subjects as well as academic achievement	Narrow academic focus
Value placed on personal and interpersonal skills and community	Little overt celebration of 'soft' skills
High expectations of behaviour for learning	Passive obedience encouraged
High levels of student agency and choice	Low levels of student agency and choice
Students feel listened to	Students do not feel listened to
Actions	

In lessons		In lessons
Active learning	←————→	Passive activities
Students are accountable for their share of cognitive load	←————→	Students not held to account for their share of cognitive load
Student feels able to say when they don't understand	←————→	Students do not feel able to say when they don't understand
Teacher ensures students understand	←————→	Student is unclear and confused
Space for peer support	←————→	Silence and individual work at all times
Student is interested in subject	←————→	Student is not interested in subject
Student sees subject as relevant to life	←————→	Student does not see the relevance of the subject to their life
Actions		

Outside lessons		Outside lessons
Break or lunch times provide space for physical or recreational activities or a safe, quiet space	←————→	Break and lunch times are problematic in terms of space and productive activity – students may feel hemmed in, bored, awkward or unsafe
Effective careers advice and guidance	←————→	Weak careers advice and guidance
Support to develop strong study skills	←————→	Poor study skills not supported
Strong extra-curricular engagement	←————→	No extra-curricular engagement
Actions		

Appendix G: Impact timeline (local)

Date	What happened
July 2019	School A: recommendations shared with senior leader at end of fieldwork
December 2019	School B: recommendations shared with senior leader at end of fieldwork
December 2019	School C: recommendations shared with senior leader at end of fieldwork
January 2020	School A report sent to link member of SLT
July 2020	School B report sent to link member of SLT plus follow up phone conversation
September 2020	School C report sent to link member of SLT plus follow up zoom meeting with this person and the member of SLT responsible for pupil premium students
March 2021	Borough report: sent to all staff participants and head of council school improvement team
March 2021	Dos and don'ts summary leaflet: sent to all participants including parents and pupils, and head of borough school improvement team
March 2021	Diagnostic framework: sent to all staff participants
March 2021	School C: meeting with senior leader to discuss using recommendations in pupil premium action plan

June 2021	School C: meetings with various staff to discuss implementation of recommendations
October 2021	Research mentioned at borough deputy heads meeting. School D interested and requested meeting.
October 2021	School D: meeting with senior leader to discuss recommendations and diagnostic framework.
October 2021	School D: meeting with mentors to discuss recommendations and explain how to use the diagnostic framework with students.
January 2022	School D: meeting with senior leader to discuss impact of diagnostic framework
July 2022	School C: meeting with senior leader to review impact. The new senior leader responsible for pupil premium students also present to facilitate handover.
August 2022	Recommendations incorporated into council strategic delivery plan for vulnerable groups (White British FSM and Black Caribbean)