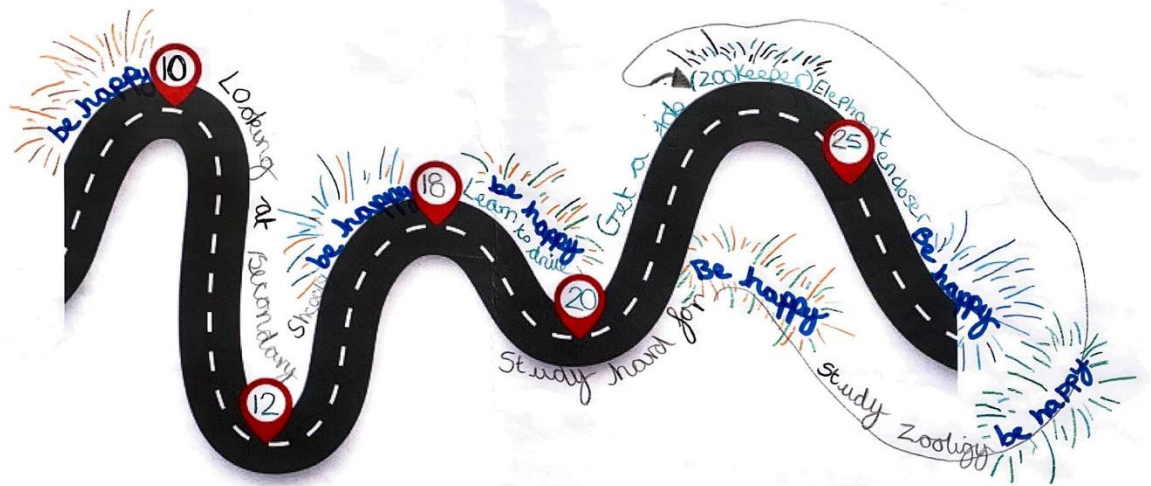


Belief in the meritocracy? Children's imagined futures in the stratified world. An intimate perspective.



Undergraduate Dissertation

Department of Geography

University of Cambridge

April 2022

Statement

To support this dissertation, I have received two and a half hours of supervision from Dr Mia Gray. This dissertation is my own independent work. This dissertation is no less than 8,000 words and no more than 10,000 words. The word count includes chapter titles, references and citations. The word count does not include this statement, the acknowledgements, abstract, table of contents, list of figures, figures, figure captions or bibliography.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my dissertation supervisor, Dr Mia Gray, for her support and guidance through this project. I would also like to thank my Director of Studies for their interest in my work and encouragement throughout the dissertation process. I am very grateful to my family and friends for their feedback on my ideas and for supporting me during my studies. Finally, I would like to thank the schools I visited to collect my data, and all the children, and their teachers, who allowed me to speak with them. Without them this project would not have been possible, and without their energy and enthusiasm it would have been much less fun.

Abstract

This research seeks to explore children's imagined futures in a time of 'austere meritocracy' (Mendick et al., 2018) as they are being encouraged by government promoted narratives of meritocracy to have ambitious, economically productive goals whilst living in a highly unequal society where social mobility is increasingly challenging (Owens and de St Croix, 2020). It seeks to understand whether young people are aware of this tension, or whether they are engaging with meritocratic narratives. Data was collected by speaking to 18 primary school students, aged 10 or 11, across three socio-economically diverse schools. Students conducted creative tasks to establish their socio-economic status, imagined futures and awareness of potential barriers to achieving their goals. Gender, class and place were found to significantly influence young people's imagined futures. Girls across the socio-economic spectrum showed awareness of barriers they were likely to face in the future as a woman and working class children showed awareness of economic barriers they were likely to face. Middle class children showed the least engagement with discourses encouraging them to become economically productive citizens and were the only group that aspired to more creative, rather than academic, jobs. This research shows that government promoted discourses of meritocracy and aspiration within the education system are not influencing all children equally, and most are aware that our society is not entirely meritocratic.

Table of Contents

Statement 2

Acknowledgements 2

Abstract 3

Table of Contents 4

List of figures 5

Chapter 1: Introduction 6

Chapter 2: Literature Review 7

Chapter 3: Methodology 14

Chapter 4: How do children’s imagined futures vary with gender? 19

Chapter 5: How do the connected, but distinct, impacts of place and class influence children’s imagined futures? 25

Chapter 6: Conclusions 33

Bibliography 36

List of figures

Figure number	Description	Page
1	Graph showing income inequality in the United Kingdom from 1980-2019 (World Inequality Database, 2019).	7
2	Graph showing unemployment rate in the United Kingdom from 2000-2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021).	8
3	Table of socio-economic statistics about three primary schools.	15
4	Table summarising information about all the children who participated in this research.	15
5	'All About Me Tree' template.	16
6	'Road to the Future' template.	17
7	Table comparing boy's and girl's future career aspirations.	21
8	Amy's 'Road to the Future'.	23
9	Maryam's 'Road to the Future'.	24
10	Table comparing children's future career aspirations by school.	26
11	Hanna's 'Road to the Future'	27
12	Florence's 'Road to the Future'	28
13	Natalia's 'All About Me Tree'	30
14	Aisha's 'Road to the Future'	32

Chapter 1: Introduction

Michael Young (1958) coined the term 'meritocracy' in his satirical novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy* where it was used to describe a dystopian society in which an individual's success was determined by their innate talent and commitment to hard work. Over the last few decades, this principle has been transformed from a sardonic critique of an unrealistic society to a desirable goal for the UK, promoted by governments across the political spectrum (Allen, 2011). The belief that the UK is a meritocratic society has been highly criticised by many scholars (Darnon et al., 2017; Littler, 2013; Berlant, 2011; Allen, 2015) who point to systemic inequality which means disadvantaged people face many more barriers when attempting to achieve the same things as more privileged groups of people. Such obstacles suggest that achievements are not simply defined by hard work and that our society is not a meritocracy.

The promotion of discourses of meritocracy has been particularly prevalent within the education system (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017) as children of all socio-economic backgrounds are encouraged to aspire to achieve anything they want to, with the understanding that they will be able to if they work hard enough. This research is not aiming to establish the extent to which these meritocratic narratives are true, as much research has already found that young people from different backgrounds will face different challenges (Atkinson et al., 2013) and are therefore unlikely to accomplish the same things, even if they aspire to. Instead, this research seeks to explore the extent to which a variety of children are engaged with meritocratic narratives and pictures of society they are fed through the state education system, and whether they are aware of any structural barriers they might face in trying to achieve their goals.

Existing studies have sought to explore the goals groups of young people have for themselves, and whether there is a difference between their dreams and what they think they might realistically achieve (Roberts and Evans, 2013). These have focused on large samples of children, allowing them to produce general findings about different groups but without focusing intersectionally on all the aspects which influence a child's identity, and how these could influence their aspirations. This study therefore takes an intimate approach (Hall, 2019) and closely examines how 18 children imagine their futures, taking into account how a variety of factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and place specifically influence them. The research explores how this diverse group of children understand their position in society and their future position in the labour market by asking them what they would like their futures to look like, and whether they can identify any factors which might make this difficult.

The results will be explored through the following two research questions:

1. How do children's imagined futures vary with gender?
2. How do the connected, but distinct, impacts of place and class influence children's imagined futures?

This research intends to explore the extent to which young people, who meritocratic narratives are aimed at, are engaging with this understanding of society. By understanding how young people view their futures, and whether they feel they are limited in what they can achieve, researchers can assess whether an 'aspiration deficit' exists between different groups or if most young people are similarly aspirational but vary in their awareness of barriers they might face in achieving their aspirations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 An uphill battle for young people

The UK is a highly unequal country. Figure 1 shows the distribution of wealth in the UK over time, with the red line showing the proportion of pre-tax of national income held by the richest 10% of the nation, and the blue line showing the pre-tax national income of the poorest 50% of the nation. The UK has become more economically unequal since 1980, and this trend is showing no sign of reversing (WID, 2019).

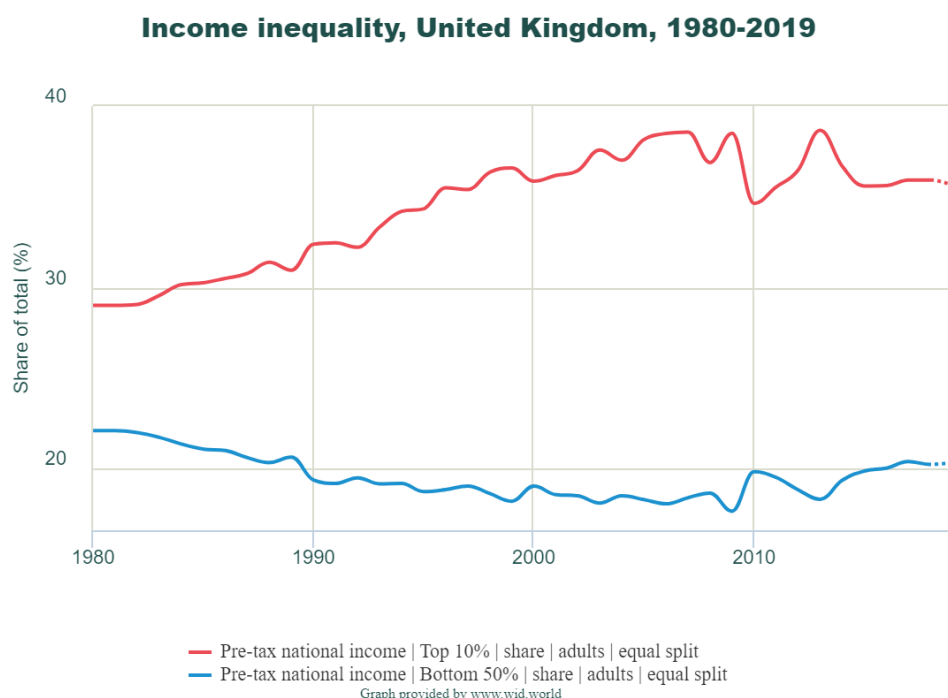


Figure 1: Graph showing the share of total pre-tax national income held by the richest 10% and poorest 50% of the nation over time (World Inequality Database, 2019).

Scholars have attributed the growing inequality shown in Figure 1 to the emergence of neoliberal economics in the 1980s, which resulted in wealth becoming concentrated in the hands of increasingly few individuals and the economy becoming much more unstable (Lansley, 2010). One implication of the spread of neoliberalism is the changing structure of the labour market, which makes finding stable, well-paid employment increasingly challenging. But not every person, or geographic area of the UK has been impacted equally by this challenge. As Figure 2 shows, young people (aged 16-24 years old) are struggling more than others to access the labour market, and to find secure, decent work within it (Orlando, 2021).

Unemployment rate (seasonally adjusted, %)

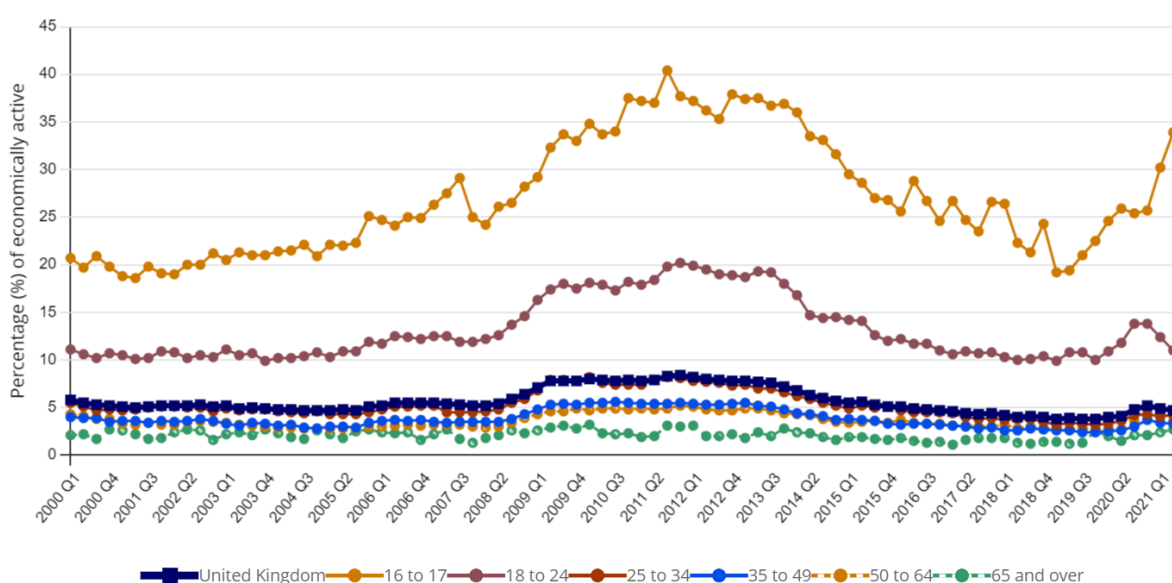


Figure 2: Graph showing unemployment rate of the economically active population of the UK, between 2000 and 2021. Data split by age group (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

2.2 Significant economic changes and their impacts on the future prospects of young people

In addition to rising wealth inequality, several economic crises have affected the UK in the last two decades. These disasters, and the policies implemented following them, have made it even more challenging for young people to enter the labour market.

Following the financial crisis in 2008, the coalition government of the UK implemented austerity policies which were presented as the inevitable solution to reducing the large public debt generated by the crisis (Gray, 2020). This resulted in budget cuts for almost every government department, which hit families and young people hard. School budgets were cut by 11% between 2010-15 (Office

of the Children's Commissioner, 2013) but schools in wealthier areas are more likely to be able to raise extra funds, thus limiting the consequences (Farthing, 2014). This increases the already significant difference between privileged and disadvantaged young people's quality of education and access to resources (Goodman and Greg, 2010).

Austerity policies have influenced the labour market, resulting in more precarious employment as well as reduced jobseeker support (Cain, 2016). Young people are therefore finding it particularly difficult to join the labour market as jobs that require minimal experience are becoming increasingly competitive and precarious (Aloisi, 2015). Recent figures reveal youth unemployment rate in the UK is 11.3% compared to 4.2% for the adult population (Powell et al., 2021). Boshoff et al's (2019) study into young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) found that young people living in urban areas, with low-educational attainment and who qualified for free school meals (FSM) in secondary school are most likely to be NEET.

Clearly it is the poorest and most vulnerable children and young people that are suffering disproportionately as a result of austerity measures, which impacts educational attainment. By age 3 there is already a significant attainment gap between the richest and poorest fifth of children. This gap grows throughout school, with 61.9% of students who are eligible for FSM not gaining 5 GCSEs at the end of their secondary education, compared to 32.5% of students not eligible for FSM (JRF, 2017). Additionally, since 1960 there has been widening inequality in who has access to higher education once they leave the formal schooling system (Smith et al., 2008). Existing studies are investigating these inequalities but this project takes a unique approach in examining how young people perceive these inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had significant impacts on young people and their future prospects. Young people in work were more likely to get furloughed than workers over 25 years old, and are overrepresented in the hardest hit sectors, such as hospitality. Predictions suggest that the pandemic will exacerbate pre-existing inequalities between privileged and disadvantaged young people, but it is too soon to know the extent of this (Learning and Work Institute, 2021).

2.3 Meritocracy and the promotion of aspiration

The idea that our society is a meritocracy has been promoted by governments across the political spectrum since neoliberal governance became widespread (Spohrer et al., 2017). Meritocracy is "the idea that whatever your social position at birth, society enables 'talent' to 'rise to the top'" (Littler, 2013: 52). This understanding of society has been transformed into a popular political narrative since the introduction of austerity measures, and is used to justify cuts which disproportionately harm

underprivileged people (Udagawa, 2014). Such a narrative explains that ‘success’ is determined by individual hard work and talent, ignoring or dismissing potential structural disadvantages. Young people are trying to navigate planning their futures in a time of “austere meritocracy” (Mendick et al., 2018:2) where there is an explicit tension between government promoted narratives of meritocracy and cuts which are actively inhibiting chances of upward social mobility.

Governments promote meritocratic narratives through discourses of aspiration, which are particularly prevalent in the education system (Owens and de St Croix, 2020). Raising the aspirations of young people has been presented by successive governments since 2008 as a way to ensure that they will reach their full potential (Udagawa, 2014). The coalition government of 2010 consistently referenced low social mobility to be the result of an ‘aspiration deficit’ among working class children, suggesting that socio-economic inequalities largely result from a lack of individual motivation (Spohrer et al., 2017). A successful individual, as defined by policy documents addressing the ‘aspiration deficit’, is one who aspires to middle class goals and who fully realises their potential to work and make money in a neoliberal economy (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017).

Tyler and Bennett (2015:6) explain aspiration as a “rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash a neoliberal economic and political project and the staggering inequalities it produces”. Aspiration is used rhetorically to support meritocratic narratives which justify and sustain a highly unequal system (Littler, 2013). This narrative suggests that the only barrier to achieving ones ‘full potential’ is having goals of doing so. These constructions of aspiration often present typically middle/ upper class goals as desirable, and present typically lower class routes as evidence of an aspiration deficit. Wanting to leave education and enter the labour market aged 16 is not evidence of an aspiration deficit, but the construction of it as such is evidence of a political narrative shaped by the most powerful social classes (Roberts and Evans, 2013).

2.4 Problematising meritocracy

Research refutes the understanding of society as meritocratic and equitable. Spohrer (2018) suggests it is not only merit which determines the success of an individual. Factors such as gender, ethnicity and class have to be considered when examining differences in educational achievement (Berrington et al., 2016). When considering their career aspirations and imagined futures, children are greatly influenced by their parent’s jobs and values (Chifamba, 2019), which are considered to be a product of social class (Oliveria et al., 2020).

Meritocracy has been described as an example of ‘cruel optimism’, as hopeful efforts to create a meritocratic society become “an obstacle to its flourishing” (Berlant, 2011:1). Removing the

structures designed to assist less privileged groups, will theoretically produce a meritocracy, but likely simultaneously create a more unequal society. It is therefore interesting that a principle which has been found to be so highly problematic is so influential in government policy, and thus the imaginations of the nation. The education system is strongly moulded by these 'cruel' narratives (Wiederkehr et al., 2015) meaning that children and young people consume them from a young age.

2.5 Gender as a barrier to meritocracy

Gender affects how young people imagine their futures, and the careers they go on to pursue. Young boys generally aspire to male dominated careers but girls aspire to a greater range of careers, suggesting that their imagined futures are less influenced by normative gender divisions (Oliviera et al., 2020). There is significant inequality within the labour market between men and women, with the higher paid sectors being dominated by men and the lower paid sectors dominated by women. In 2021, 78% of health and social care workers were women and in 2019, 71% of FTSE100 company directors were men (Devine et al., 2021).

One explanation why women are struggling to access these high paid, managerial roles is that they often take disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic labour. As well as undertaking formal, paid work, women often shoulder most of the responsibility for homemaking and childcare, which Hirschfeld and Machung (1989) famously termed the "second shift". Across the world, women undertake 75% of all unpaid domestic and care work. Therefore, they are often unable to put equal effort into their work as their male colleagues who can be flexible with overtime hours due to fewer childcare responsibilities. This leads to gender disparities in wages, experience and promotion opportunities (OECD, 2019). Thus, gender can be an inhibiting factor for women in reaching their career goals which further refutes claims that we live in a meritocratic society.

Referring to gender as a binary between male and female is highly reductive and simplistic (Thorne et al., 2019) but the only feasible option for the scope of this research. All of the children involved in this research self-identified as either male or female, so the use of such a binary did not affect the results.

2.6 Conceptualising class

Another significant factor in shaping the futures of young people has been found not to be individual aspiration, but class. It is widely acknowledged that class, on the whole, is inherited from parents and consolidated by the education system (Aldrich et al., 1998). But the concept of class is highly contested, making it difficult to define. This research will use Bourdieu's (1986) class theory, which

takes a broad view of class as constituted through social, economic and cultural 'capital' and appreciates the symbolic power that social class has within society (Riley, 2017). Many theories of class are based almost exclusively on employment position, but Bourdieu also incorporates important factors such as social circles and leisure activities.

Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation of class informs this research, as the children provided a variety of information about themselves and their families, from which I attempted to establish their approximate position within the class spectrum. It is not always productive or desirable to establish the precise position of the research participants on the class spectrum (Savage et al., 2013) but it is critical to acknowledge the power of social class in shaping children's interests and futures. Membership of the upper or middle social classes is likely to provide a greater variety of opportunities and mean that individuals face fewer structural barriers in their lives (Haider, 2016; Allen, 2015). This research seeks to understand the extent to which children are aware of this class-dependent variation in opportunity, and whether this influences the kind of future they imagine for themselves.

2.7 Popularised ideas of success as fame

Young people are currently facing a unique combination of challenges, with austerity policies shrinking education budgets, the labour market becoming increasingly difficult to access and narratives dictating that effort is the simple key to success being promoted more than ever. In the midst of this, government policy and the media are constructing very specific, sometimes contradictory, portrayals of 'success'. Representations of celebrities in the media shape young people's understanding of success, and their desires for the future (Mendick et al., 2018). Some celebrities stories of going from 'rags to riches' epitomise the meritocratic narrative, and their lives are presented as glamorous and desirable, inspiring some young people to crave a similar lifestyle (Gountas et al., 2012). However, some celebrities, often those who are working class and/or female, are portrayed by the media as having gained fame through luck, not hard work, and are therefore undeserving of their success (Allen and Mendick, 2013). This may influence whether young people aspire to become celebrities, and what they deem to be the appropriate route to achieving fame.

Many researchers have investigated how young people view celebrities, and what makes them deserving of 'success' (Mendick et al., 2018; Brown, 2011; Berrington et al., 2016). My research builds on this to investigate whether or not children aspire to be famous, and what they think it would take to achieve. I take an explicitly intersectional approach to understand which groups of

children are most inspired by the concept of fame and explore whether children from different backgrounds can comprehend any of the difficulties they might face in achieving such goals.

2.8 Intersectionality and place

As the factors which influence a child's future are so varied, it is imperative that an intersectional approach to this research is taken. To consider intersectionality is to focus on how multiple forms of oppression and expression operate simultaneously, rather than to look only at one aspect of identity and its implications (Hopkins, 2019). Intersectionality also requires that researchers examine power dynamics and forms of inequality that exist in social spaces, and how these influence group and individual identity (Tefera et al., 2018). Considering how disadvantage and exclusion operate through multiple facets of identity simultaneously is crucial for this research, as creating a detailed case study requires a holistic understanding of an individual's situations. It is also important to consider all aspects of one's identity when comparing the responses of children from different backgrounds.

This research also considers place as a factor which shapes children's identity and imagined futures, and will thus argue that place is an important, but under-theorised aspect of intersectionality (Jack, 2010). Place is an important part of identity and is intrinsically linked to aspiration. This is seen in children's (often explicit) desire to stay in an area, or to leave it (Brown, 2011). Attachment to place has a strong impact on identity, and understanding of place helps inform an individual's perception of their position within society (Jack, 2010). This is expressed in Wacquant's (2008) theory of territorial stigmatisation, which explains how specific geographical areas become stigmatised as dangerous and undesirable. These are generally poor areas, home to high densities of ethnic minority groups, suggesting that class and race contribute to this process (Contreras, 2017). Residents of these stigmatised areas may also contribute; if they feel embarrassed by their address they may seek to leave the area as soon as possible (Wacquant, 2014). It is clear that place, and imaginings of a place, can influence individual identities and behaviours. This research will investigate how place influences children's imagined futures, and how their sense of place shapes their imagined futures.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The epistemological approach of this research emphasises the importance of telling individual stories, and situating them in their social and cultural context, to inform theory. It values personal,

individual narratives as units of analysis (Moen, 2006) and uses them to construct detailed case studies with the aim of informing understanding of contemporary inequality (Yin, 2009), and generating theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999).

Hall (2019) argues that the lived experience of individuals must be seen as valid knowledge and gives value to their stories by telling them through her research. This personal, intimate approach to research does not seek to generate “all-encompassing, widely applicable findings” (Hall, 2019: 8) but to highlight and understand details and differences only visible on the individual scale. Strong (2020) builds on this by using individual stories to reveal the nuances of intersectionality. Telling specific stories can effectively illuminate how different layers of identity produce unique situations and experiences, as well as promoting voices that are often disregarded and allowing marginalised voices to provide counter narratives to dangerous universal claims (Maynes et al., 2008).

In this study I speak to 18 children, from three primary schools, and seek to tell their stories. By engaging with this number of children I am able to gain a detailed, intimate perspective on their backgrounds and their thoughts about the future, and appreciate some of the nuance of their stories. These stories are used to construct three case studies (based around each primary school) which will enable the data to reveal important contextual information, which is critical when trying to understand a contemporary, real-life phenomenon in detail (Yin, 2009).

3.2 Data Collection

To collect this data I visited three primary schools in the Bristol and Bath areas of south-west England. I was limited geographically to these two cities, and so selected the primary schools based on their different socio-economic contexts, to try and speak to a broad range of children within a fairly local scale. Figure 3 shows the diversity of the schools.

Table showing socio-economic information about three primary schools.

	Easton Academy	St Johns Primary School	St Saviours Junior School
% of pupils eligible for free school meals	47.6	6.1	17.3
% of pupils whose first language is not English	82.9	13.3	16.5
% pupils with SEN support	15.1	10.2	14.3
proportion of students identified as 'disadvantaged'	51%	8%	18%

Figure 3: Table showing four socio-economic statistics about the three primary schools visited for this research.

Across these schools, I spoke to 18 Year Six children, all aged 10 or 11 years old. I asked the teachers at each school to provide me with 6-8 children of different genders, social, cultural and economic backgrounds and academic abilities. The schools fulfilled these criteria with different levels of success. The details of the children I worked with are provided in Figure 4.

Table providing overview of the children spoken to during data collection.

	Easton Academy	St Johns Primary School	St Saviours Junior School	Total
Children spoken to	7	3	8	18
Girls	5	3	5	13
Boys	2	0	3	5
Children with English as an additional language	4	1	0	5
Children whose parent(s) had jobs	2	3	7	12
Children's housing arrangement				
Flat	5	1	0	6
House	2	2	8	12

Figure 4: Summary table of children spoken to during data collection in all three primary schools.

In each primary school, I spoke to the children as a small group, in a room separate from their peers. I asked them to conduct two creative tasks, which I designed myself. Such creative, visual methods are particularly lucrative when working with children, who may be less able to formulate a sequence of ideas or verbalise their thoughts (Warr et al., 2016).

The first task I asked the children to complete I named the 'All About Me Tree'. I provided them each with the template shown in Figure 5, printed clearly in the middle of an A3 piece of paper. I asked them to think of themselves as the trunk of the tree and draw or write on each of the branches interesting things about them which would enable me to get to know them. This exercise was a relaxed attempt to understand each child's socio-economic background, and so I was quite specific with the kind of information I wanted from them. For example, parent's occupation is a key indicator of social class (Chifamba, 2019) and something I was eager for them to include. I was careful not to be leading with my language as I wanted to minimise how much I influenced their answers. I asked open questions like "who do you live with?" and "what do they do while you're at school?". I also asked them to include other, broader indicators of class, such as favourite foods, favourite places and drawings of their homes to establish their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

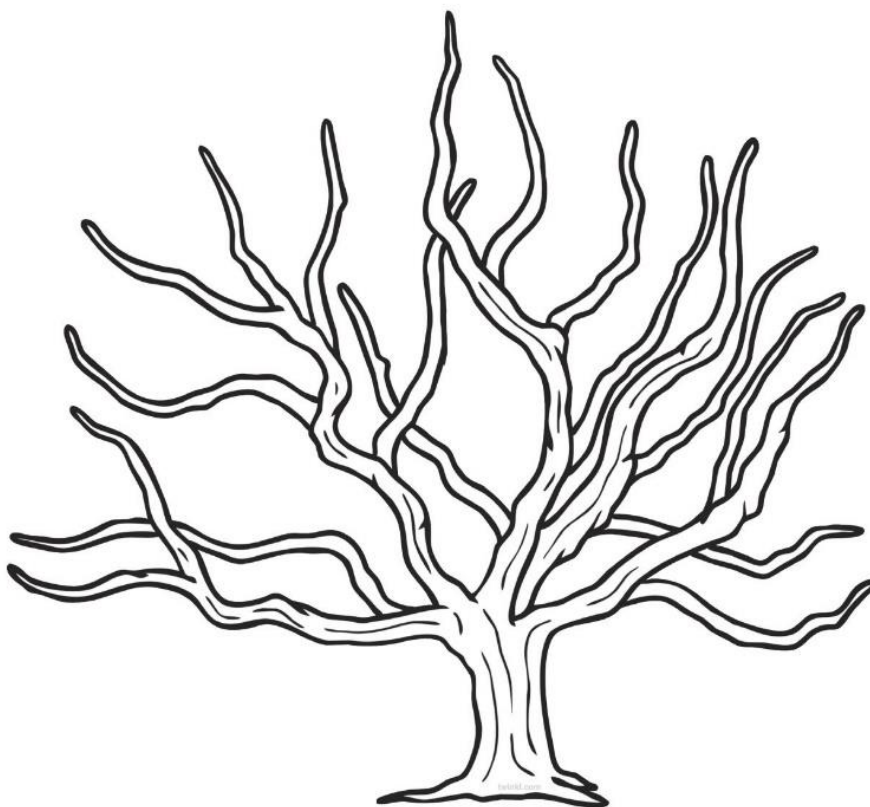


Figure 5: 'All About Me Tree' template.

The second task was named 'The Road to the Future', a title coined by some of the students whilst completing the task. The template shown in Figure 6 was printed for each child onto a piece of A3 paper, and I asked them to write their current age in the red bubble furthest to the left of the section of road shown and consider this their current point in life. I asked them to write other ages (up to 30-35) in the remaining bubbles and draw or write what they wanted their life to look like at

each of these points. Again, I was careful not to be presumptuous with my language, never mentioning higher education or marriage, only asking them open questions such as “where might you want to live at this point, and with whom?”. This was to get them to visualise and talk about their imagined futures. I then asked them to take a different coloured pen, and indicate any potential barriers, or issues that might face, which would make their journey along their road more challenging. This was an attempt to reveal their understanding of structural barriers and the extent to which they believed our society was meritocratic.

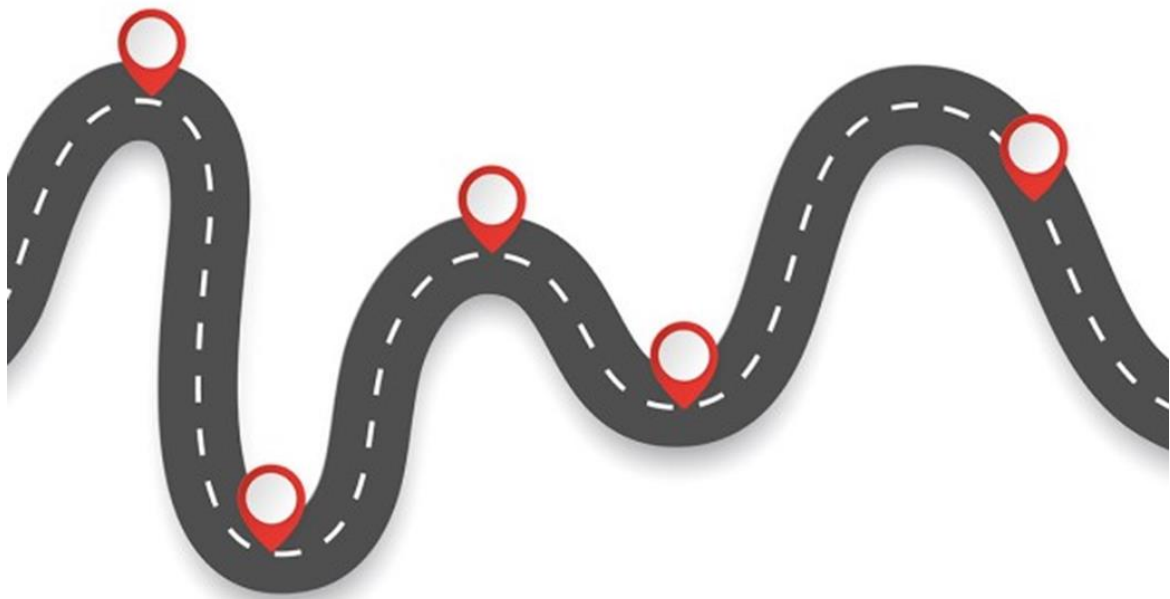


Figure 6: ‘Road to the Future’ template.

These physical pieces of work are important pieces of data in this research, but also important were the conversations I had with the children whilst completing the tasks. I recorded these conversations in detailed field notes, no more than 20 minutes after conversation with the group had ended.

3.3 Data Analysis

Existing literature allowed me to predict the themes such as gender, social class and place were likely to emerge from the data (Yin, 2009). This research aimed to combine such deductive approaches with inductive analysis. Thus my own reflections, which were not taken directly from literature, were also used to analyse and draw interesting patterns from the data. This was a

reiterative process which allowed for themes determined by existing literature to be analysed, as well as new themes to emerge as a result of detailed, inductive readings of the data (Thomas, 2003).

The aim of this research was to generate grounded theory, which is theory developed from, and linked to, specific data. This approach is applicable to data sets of any size and is particularly lucrative when data from different groups can be compared to reach conclusions (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). By looking closely at the narratives the children constructed about themselves and their futures, and comparing the three case studies, I was able to tentatively develop theory from the trends and dominant themes which emerged.

This research also involved visual data analysis, as the physical pieces of work the children produced were important data sources. Visual data is most useful for exploring trends and ideas, rather than providing definitive proof of hypotheses (Banks, 2007). This compliments the combination of inductive and deductive data analysis employed in this project. When analysing the visual data it was of paramount importance to consider who created the image and its intended audience (Rose, 2021). This visual data is a product of the child who created it, its context and their perceptions of me, the researcher.

3.4 Evaluation and Limitations

As Figure 4 shows, the 18 children I spoke to were not evenly distributed across the three schools. Ideally, I would have liked to speak to 6-8 children from each school, but this was not possible as not every child returned their permission slip. This means that I have more data from some schools than others and am thus able to draw a greater quantity of more detailed conclusions about some groups of children than others. This means that my conclusions are not as definitive as they might have been if all schools had provided the same number and variety of children. Additionally the case study approach adopted by this project means that the findings are localised, and the extent to which they can be scaled up is limited.

For safeguarding reasons, I was not able to record the meetings I had with the children, meaning that I do not have a record of every conversation I had with the children. This is a potentially limiting factor, as I had to rely on my memory when recording field notes. My subsequent notes were likely shaped by conversations that I found particularly interesting, and completely miss any conversations the children may have had between themselves which I did not hear.

3.5 Positionality

It is always important to acknowledge the bias of the researcher, and how their identity may shape their research (Cisneros-Puebla et al., 2004). It is probable that being a student at the University of Cambridge influenced the children's responses to some of my questions. The reputation of this institution means it is likely that at least some of the children will have had pre-conceived ideas about me and my ideas about hard work and success, which may have influenced their responses.

In addition, my position as a young, middle class, female student is likely to have subconsciously influenced the themes I identified within the data, and the trends I chose to analyse. The element of inductive analysis in this research means that there is an element of subjectivity and opinion within my findings. A different researcher may not identify the same trends, but this is a feature of the indicative approach.

3.6 Ethics

Before speaking to any of the children, I obtained consent from their parents. This was achieved by sending out a letter to the parents in advance of our meeting, explaining what I was planning to ask their children to do, and for what purpose. All the children I worked with had returned permission slips, signed by their parents, ensuring full parental consent. Before beginning the tasks with each group of children, I introduced myself and my project briefly, before clearly explaining what I wanted them to do and why. I made clear that they did not have to do anything they did not want to and were free to ask me questions at any point. When writing about the children I have used pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

Chapter 4: How do children's imagined careers vary with gender?

4.1 Celebrity and fame

Representations of celebrities in the media are important in shaping political discourses, and constructing young people's aspirations (Mendick et al., 2018). The portrayal of celebrities' lives as idyllic and enviable helps the media construct an ideal person, who has worked for their achievements and is therefore very wealthy. These values feature prominently in popular media and government policy, and hence have a significant effect on young people's identity creation (Allen and Mendick, 2013).

Children's future aspirations reveal highly gendered patterns (Francis, 2002). In this research, the majority of boys expressed the desire to be a professional football player at some point in their lives, and although none of them referenced money or fame as the motivation for this, it is highly likely that

this is inspired by the high-profile celebrity footballers so prevalent in the media they consume. Playing football recreationally and aspiring to become professional is a common way for young boys to imitate their role models (Swain, 2000). Oli (10), a middle class boy, envisaged starting his professional footballing career at 18 years old by signing his first contract with a team. By 25 years he had hoped to “move to a bigger team”, before retiring from football at 35. Despite not being explicitly motivated by wealth or a celebrity lifestyle, Oli’s desire to transition to a “bigger” team reveals that his idea of success is determined by status, revealing an implicit aspiration towards a degree of celebrity life. He did not expect to simply become a high-profile footballer immediately but acknowledged that he would have to begin his career playing for a “smaller” team and gradually progress. This shows some belief in meritocratic narratives, as Oli felt that reaching his goal was feasible, but that his achievement of celebrity status would, and should, require hard work. The value of hard work is central to political and educational discourses of aspiration, as children are taught that it is the only thing standing between them and their goals (Mendick et al., 2015).

A much smaller proportion of the girls involved in this study expressed a desire for fame, or jobs associated with mainstream celebrities. One girl wanted to become an actress, and another a fashion designer. But while the boys were extremely convicted about their desire to become professional footballers, these girls were much less certain about their choice. This could be the result of gendered understandings of celebrity. Allen and Mendick (2013) found that female celebrities are often seen as less valid than male celebrities, as their fame is assumed to come from their bodies or their presence within reality television, which is perceived by young people as undeserving of fame, as they are not seen to have worked hard for their achievements. This is particularly true of female celebrities with working class backgrounds. In contrast, male celebrities are legitimised as their fame is seen as the product of hard work. Professional footballers specifically are praised within media and public discourses for their strength, power and domination. These discourses also contribute to patriarchal understandings of some careers as more masculine and therefore desirable than others (Swain, 2000). These narratives have a significant influence on the formation of young people’s identity (Allen and Mendick, 2013) and may explain why the girls in this research did not aspire to the life of a celebrity in the same way that many of the boys did.

Working class young people are often stereotyped as being more likely than their middle class peers to aspire to a life characterised by wealth and fame (Brown, 2011). My study corroborates others in refuting this claim (Tyler and Bennet, 2010; Mendick et al., 2015), as the boys from across the socio-economic spectrum aspired to be professional footballers, and girls from all social classes expressed less desire for fame. None of the participants were explicitly motivated by wealth, even those who

wanted to be professional footballers. This suggests that the children were not entirely invested in becoming the ideal government-promoted neoliberal citizen, who maximise their potential to generate money within the labour market (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017). However, none of the children imagined futures without financial stability, meaning they were not completely resisting the neoliberal narrative despite not engaging with it to its fullest extent.

4.2 Gendered division of imagined careers

The imagined careers of the children in this study varied with gender. As Figure 7 shows, girls in this study aspired to a much greater range of careers than boys. Some of the girls aspired towards typically female dominated careers, such as teaching and fashion design, but others strove towards male dominated careers such as engineering. The greater range of careers mentioned by girls may be partially explained by the fact that considerably more girls than boys took place in the study. However, the small sample size does not render this finding insignificant as similar patterns are reflected in multiple other studies examining career aspirations and gender (Oliviera et al., 2020; Francis, 2002).

Children's career aspirations

Boys	Girls
Football player (3)	Zookeeper
Carpenter	Teacher
	Actor
	Author
	Engineer
	Fashion designer
	Doctor
	Psychologist
	Vet (2)
	SEN Teacher

Figure 7: Table showing career aspiration of the children, divided by gender. Does not include children who did not have a clear career goal.

Girls have not always aimed for such a wide range of careers. Historically, studies found girl's career aspirations were limited exclusively to female dominated careers, such as social care, and saw work only as an income generator before they got married (Adams and Walkerdine, 1986; Best, 1983). There is nothing wrong with women choosing these careers, or engaging only in house-based, unpaid labour but women feeling that they did not have alternative options is a great waste of potential (Francis, 2002). But, as the results of my study show, girls are now aspiring to a much greater range of

careers. This change is partly the result of social and economic changes resulting in more women entering the labour market (Cipollone et al., 2014). This also shows that women are becoming more ambitious in their career aspirations and seeing society as more of a meritocracy, with gender not being viewed as an inhibiting factor. It is important to note that this does not mean that gender is no longer a barrier to achieving certain goals, but, in terms of aspiration, gender is not holding women back to the extent it once did (Francis, 2000). It does not appear that men are aspiring to a greater range of careers, and still largely see themselves working in male dominated sectors. My research corroborates Francis (2002) and Oliviera et al. (2020) in finding that boys are less willing to transgress traditional gender boundaries than girls, who have recently widened their range of aspirations. Therefore, there is still a difference in the careers that boys and girls are aspiring to, as boys aspire to a more limited range of careers than girls.

4.3 Awareness of the female burden

When thinking about their imagined futures beyond their careers, half of the girls and boys in this research expressed the desire to have a family of their own. As a researcher, I was careful not to express any heteronormative or class-based assumptions about family life, but all the children who wanted a family imagined themselves leaving education (at different stages), getting a job and then starting a family. Some mentioned a partner, or being married before having children, but others thought only about the child rearing aspect of family life.

Understandings of what being a parent would entail differed between the boys and girls. Boys who wanted to be parents saw a family as a natural progression of their life path; something that would be enjoyable but would not significantly affect the rest of their life plans. However, the girls saw parenthood as something that would considerably change the course of their imagined futures, and therefore whether or not to have children was not a straightforward decision. The young girls in this study showed awareness of the “second shift” (Horschild and Machung, 1989) they were likely to face as a working mother, which they felt presented them with a choice between reaching their career aspirations or being a parent. This conflict could be informed by the dominant view that a ‘good’ mother is one whose time is taken up solely by parenting, and therefore has no time for anything else (Tichenor et al., 2017).

Girl’s understandings of the second shift varied by class. Amy, an upper middle class girl, was deeply aware of the responsibilities she would gain as a mother, causing her to weigh up whether she wanted children enough to justify the setbacks it would cause to her career. She had hopes to live in Germany and become a teacher of children with additional needs. In her spare time she wanted to volunteer

for an environmental charity, and planned to have children at about 30 years old. But she felt conflicted by the idea that children would take up a lot of her time, removing some of her freedom for leisure activities, and delaying her completion of all the training she would need for her dream job. She decided that she would have children, but decisively circled parenthood as a potential barrier to her other aspirations coming to fruition, along with achieving A-Level grades and completing teacher training (see Figure 8). In contrast, Lara, a lower middle class girl from a comfortable but not wealthy area, took a more relaxed approach to the idea of having children. She also imagined having children at about 30 years old, by which point she would have completed her “exploring part of life”, suggesting that she was ready to settle down and take on the responsibilities associated with being a mother. She showed awareness that there would be less freedom in her life once she became a parent, which would be a sacrifice, but not a decision that caused significant inner conflict. These varying attitudes to motherhood reveal the different priorities girls of different social classes had for their lives. Amy was more concerned about the impact having children would have on her achievements, whereas Lara saw different stages of her life as periods for different things. These priorities may be a reflection of class, as Amy wanted to devote time to activities which would increase her social status and cultural capital, mirroring the significant adults in her life. In contrast, Lara had grown up with less cultural capital, and so was unlikely to prioritise having so much (Chifamba, 2019; Savage et al., 2013).

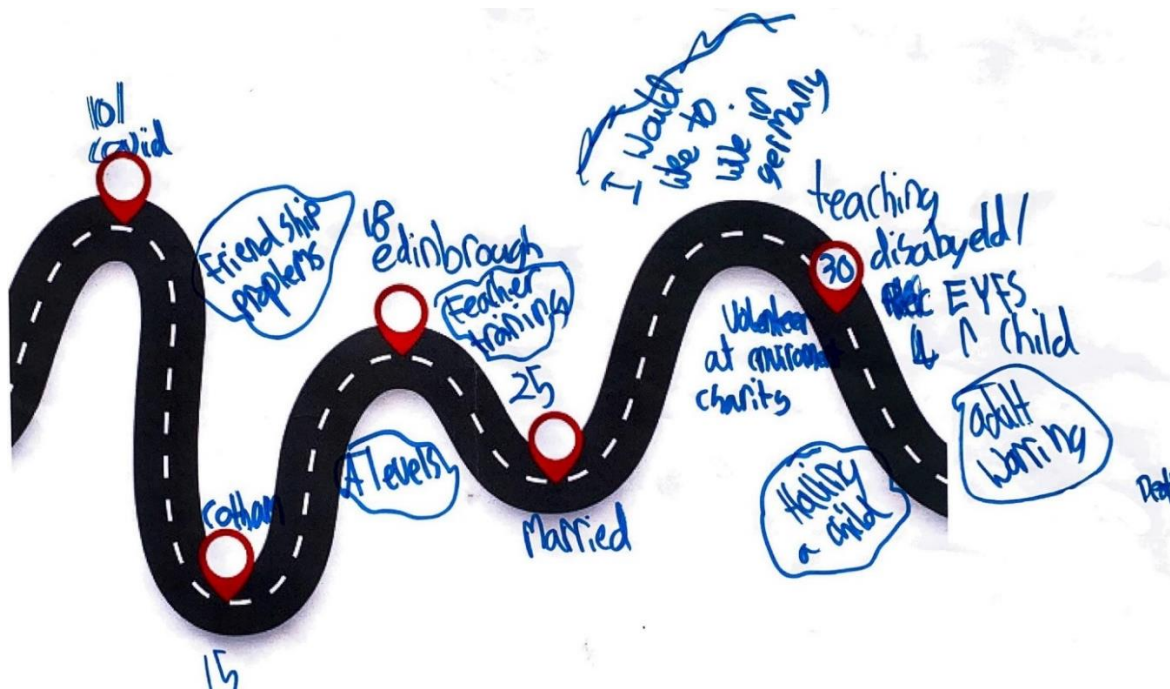


Figure 8: Amy's 'Road to the Future'

Girl's perceptions of the "second shift" also varied with ethnicity. Maryam, a lower middle class girl from the least wealthy area I visited, placed a lot of value of family. She planned not to move away for university in order to stay near her family, and to become an engineer when she graduated. At 30 years old, she imagined herself retiring from work to focus creating her own family and would "continue her dream" of being an engineer when her children grew up and left home (see Figure 9). This understanding of motherhood may be influenced by Maryam's Pakistani heritage (Georgas, 2003). Asian women sometimes experience pressure to be very successful in their education, and raise similarly high achieving children (Tichenor et al., 2017), which could be reflected in Maryam's desire to pursue education to a high level, and then completely shift her focus onto her children when the time comes. Additionally, mothers of ethnic minority status are likely to face more discrimination in the workplace than white mothers, possibly making it easier to simply not enter the workplace whilst undertaking mothering commitments (Collins, 1994). Due to Maryam's age it is unlikely that she would be aware of this discrimination she may face in the workplace as a mother, but she may have been influenced by women close to her who have had this experience, causing them to leave formal employment. Maryam's imagined future was very heavily influenced by her cultural values.

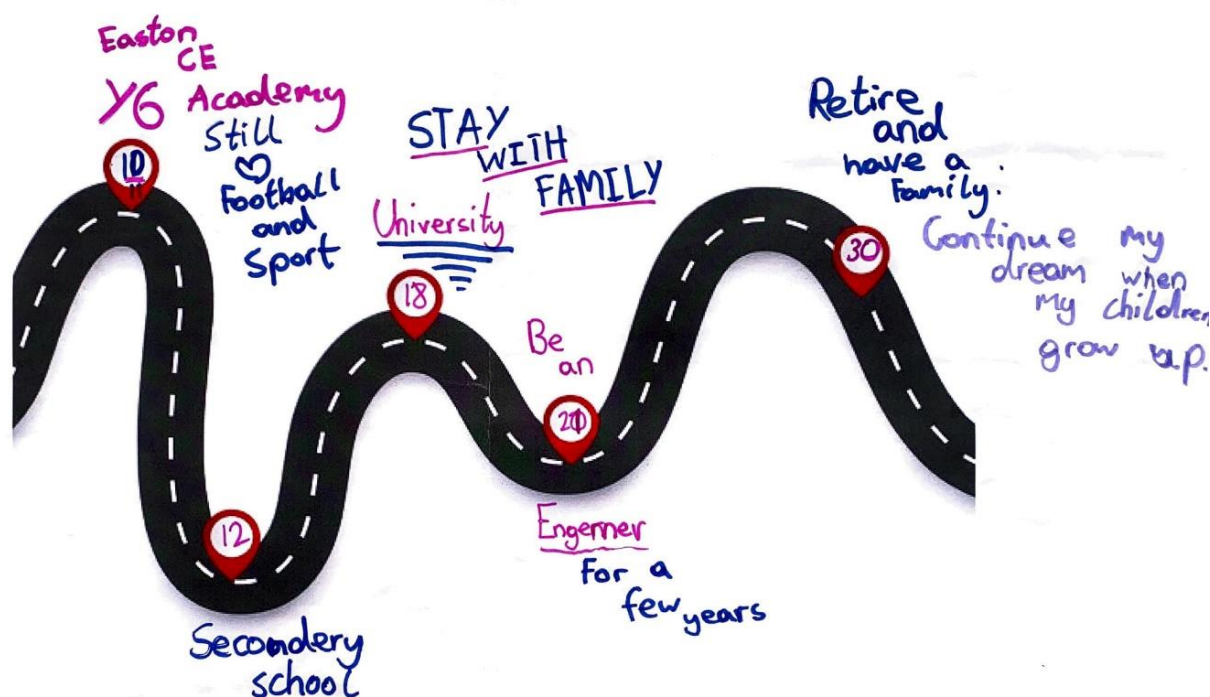


Figure 9: Maryam's 'Road to the Future'

4.4 Conclusion

Overall, children's imagined futures, and their understandings of meritocratic narratives, vary significantly with gender. In terms of future careers, girls aspire to a much greater range of jobs than boys do, suggesting that they do not feel constrained by gender roles within the workplace. However, girls were very aware of the gender roles they might be expected to conform to outside the workplace, such as taking primary responsibility for domestic labour and childcare. Understandings of gender roles varied with class and ethnicity and had the most significant influence on the imagined future of working class girls from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Additionally, boys were found to be more influenced than girls by ideas of celebrity, but only wanted to achieve their goals of becoming a celebrity through hard work which would enable them to achieve excellence. Hard work was highly valued as popular discourses have delegitimised some celebrities for achieving their status through chance. This mirrors meritocratic narratives which promote hard work as the appropriate and desirable route to success (Rowlingson and Connor, 2011).

Chapter 5: How do the connected, but distinct, impacts of place and class influence children's imagined futures?

5.1 How children's imagined futures and career aspirations vary with class

Being an aspirational, income generating citizen has been given discursive importance through government promoted narratives of meritocracy (Brown, 2011). These narratives are powerful, but may not be the most influential factor shaping young people's aspirations. Families influence a child's norms and their values, which is so formative that by the age of 5 children are beginning to express ideas about the future that align with their parent's reality (Chifamba, 2019). All the children in this study were clearly influenced by their families and the class-based values they had internalised (Cummins, 2013).

Comparison of career aspiration across schools

St John's	St Saviours	Easton Academy
SEN teacher	Carpenter	Engineer
Psychologist	Zookeeper	Doctor
Vet	Teacher	Footballer x2
	Footballer	Fashion designer
	Actor	Unsure x2
	Vet	
	Author	
	Doctor	

Figure 10: Table showing different children's aspirational career goals, and the school they attended.

At St John's Primary School, the children I spoke to were able to clearly map out what they wanted their futures to look like and showed understanding of the steps this would require. As Figure 10 shows, they desired prestigious jobs, requiring high levels of education, and were able to explain when and how they might undertake this. These are well paid, well respected jobs which reflect these young people's upper middle class backgrounds (Jakopovich, 2014). The parents of these children all held professional or managerial jobs which would require at least a university degree, revealing the significant influence of family.

The less privileged children at Easton Academy expressed similar career aspirations. Other than the boys who wanted to be professional footballers, most of the children aspired to have prestigious jobs which require a high level of education. When explaining the unequal economic success of young people, UK governments frequently blamed the 'aspiration deficit' of working class young people, claiming they do not aspire to economically productive jobs (Spohrer, 2018). This study corroborates others (Spohrer et al., 2017; Owens and de St Croix, 2020; Mendick et al., 2018) in finding this claim to be completely false. The working class young people in this study expressed aspirations to which fit with the model of a highly engaged neoliberal citizen (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017).

However, the children at Easton Academy showed very little understanding of the steps they would take to achieve these goals. Most of them had considered university, but there was a lot of confusion about what studying at university entailed. This reflects their home environments, as the majority of these children's parents did not hold professional or managerial jobs, and a significant number were unemployed. Therefore, they were less likely to have family members who had attended university (McGuinness, 2003). When investigating the aspirations of young people, Brown (2011) found that

whilst nearly all children aspired to high-level jobs, accessing these careers is likely to be less daunting for middle class children than their working class peers, as the process is much more familiar. This is reflected in this study by the detail that the more privileged children were able to give about their imagined futures, and the contrasting lack of awareness of the less well-off children.

Easton Academy was also the only school where a few of the children were unable to imagine their futures in any detail at all. Two of the children really struggled to identify any goals or aspirations for their futures and could not imagine their lives beyond the next immediate step, the transition to secondary school. For example, Hanna (10) explained that she was born in Bristol, but her parents were both born in Somalia. Their English was limited, but her Dad occasionally did some delivery work and her Mum was unemployed. She had an older sibling, so understood that she would go to the same secondary school as them and wanted to go to college after that. She was not able to give any further details about what her future might look like (see Figure 11). This may be the result of personality, as some children are naturally much less inclined to plan their futures than others (Winterton et al., 2011). But this could also be a reflection of class and family background. Unlike the more privileged children, Hanna's parents did not have clear and established careers which is likely to make it more difficult for her to imagine a career path, or envisage what some careers might involve (Roberts and Evans, 2013).

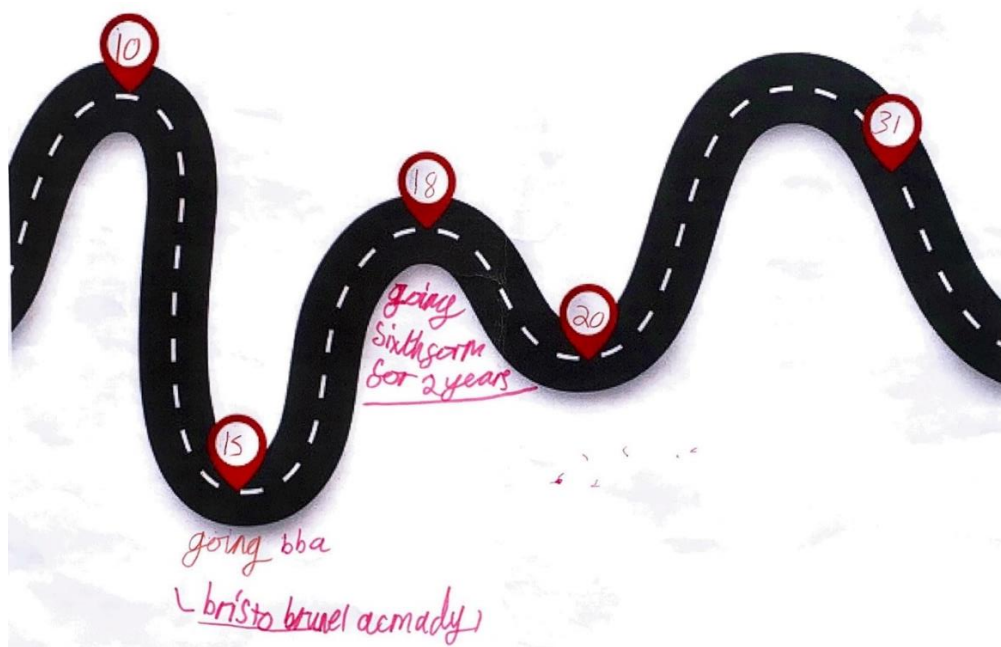


Figure 11: Hanna's 'Road to the Future'

In contrast, the children at St Saviours Primary School expressed slightly different future goals. Whilst their career aspirations showed some overlap with the other two groups of children, a significant number of this group expressed a desire to do more creative jobs, such as become a carpenter or an author. This group also expressed a much greater range of aspirations than the other two schools, with some children feeling that their employment progression was a secondary concern, and that establishing a family or achieving high general wellbeing was their principal priority. Florence (10) aspired to be a zookeeper, specifically working in the elephant enclosure as this is her favourite animal. She had lots of goals for her future, such as learning to drive and getting a job, but as shown in Figure 12, her main concern was being happy. Florence, along with most of the children at St Saviours Primary School, seemed much less motivated by the prestige of their future job or its social status, but prioritised happiness and being creative. This is evidence that the children in the middle of the class and income spectrum were least influenced by the discourse of becoming the ‘best’ neoliberal citizen which is promoted within the education system, and some simply aspire to a comfortable life (Reay, 2013).

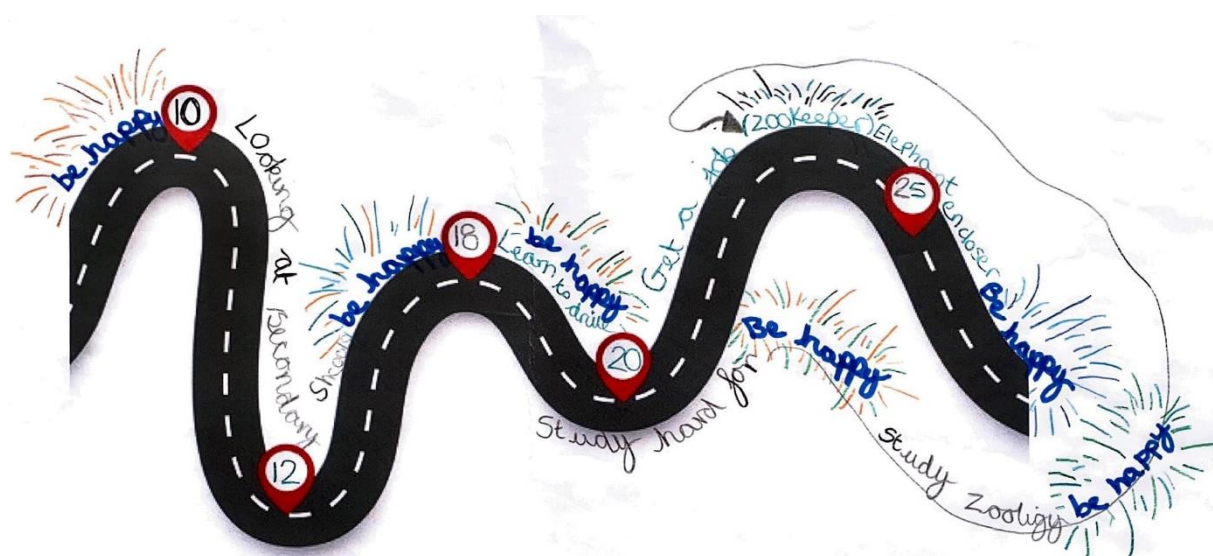


Figure 12: Florence's 'Road to the Future'

Children's imagined futures are influenced by their home environments and their internalised class values. However, this does not result in a linear increase of 'ideal neoliberal aspiration' with the movement from working, to middle, to upper class. Different class values result in young people having different priorities for their futures, and different levels of awareness about what it is going to take to achieve their goals.

5.2 Difference in understandings of place

Attachment to place is a fundamental part of childhood and contributes to the formation of an individual's identity from a young age (Jack, 2010). It shapes a child's understanding of the present, and their position within society, and Brown (2011) argues that place has a profound effect on one's aspirations. Analysing the understandings of place shown by the children in this study reveals interesting class-based patterns.

Many of the children from Easton Academy understood their local area as an undesirable place to live. Natalia (11) drew the block of flats she lived in on her 'all about me tree' (see Figure 13) and explained to me that sometimes the police were called to her estate and that she thought 'bad things' happened there more than she imagined they did in other places. She was somewhat ashamed of the neighbourhood she lived in, as were many of her peers who lived in the same area. This is an example of territorial stigmatisation, where certain areas of a city, often areas characterised by poverty, degraded housing and large populations of ethnic minorities, gain a negative reputation throughout the city (Wacquant, 2008). This stigmatisation is heavily racialised and class-based, and deeply affects residents of these areas, often resulting in them speaking negatively about their neighbourhood and trying to distance themselves from it (Wacquant, 2014). However, the internalised stigma displayed by these children did not manifest in a desire to leave the area, with most imagining their futures locally. Those who specified where they might want to live all imagined themselves remaining in this area, mostly to be near their families. This can be interpreted as evidence of young people contesting territorial stigmatisation, as despite being aware of its bad reputation, and potentially undesirable status they did not want to escape their home neighbourhood. Whilst territorial stigmatisation is clearly having a significant effect on these young people, its impacts differ from those Wacquant originally theorised (Wacquant et al., 2014; Watt, 2020). The familiarity of the place and the value of close proximity to family outweighed its negative connotations.

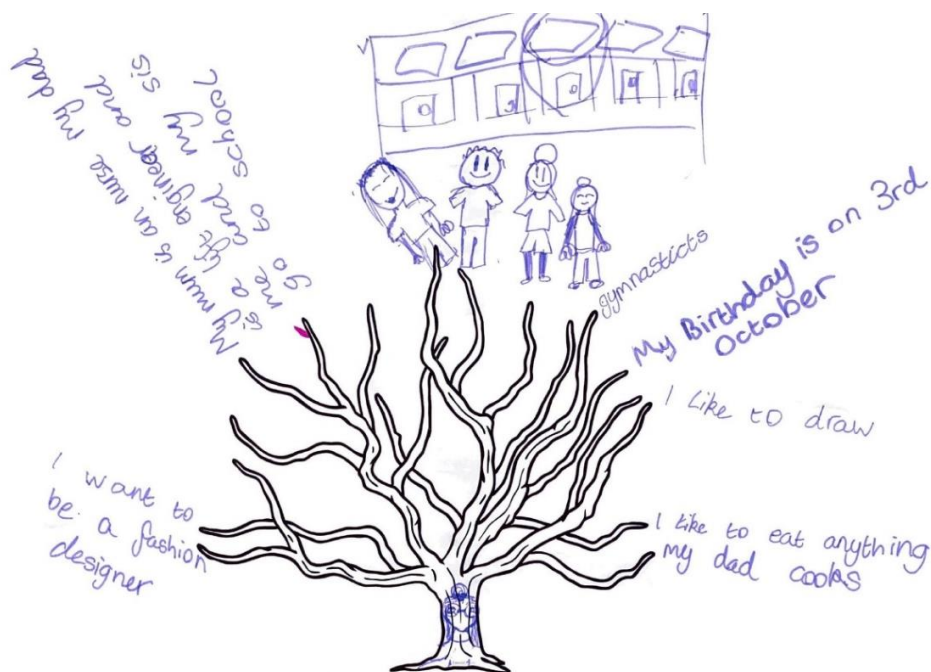


Figure 13: Natalia's 'All About Me Tree'

In contrast, the children from St John's Primary School had a very different understanding of place. They were aware that they lived in a desirable, privileged area, and Matilda (10) was slightly embarrassed when drawing her house because it was very big. However, they expressed a lot less attachment to their local area than the children of Easton Academy and imagined their futures in lots of different places. Pheobe (11) imagined going to university in Edinburgh and then moving to Germany to get a job and start a family. The children from St John's Primary School were much more cosmopolitan in their thinking and were the only group in the study to imagine their futures not taking place in their current home neighbourhood, potentially because their high cultural capital had enabled them to travel more widely than other children (Jakopovich, 2014), and therefore have greater awareness of a range of desirable locations (Adams et al., 2017). Overall, the more disadvantaged children show more attachment to their local neighbourhood than their privileged peers, due to more cultural and familial value being associated with an area, and less exposure to and awareness of a variety of places.

5.3 Understanding of economic structural barriers/ inequality

One of the factors contributing to disproportionately high unemployment among young people is financial pressure and a lack of personal economic resources. Gaining skills and education which enable young people to access well paid jobs is often not feasible as it would require significant amounts of unpaid training and studying. This disproportionately affects disadvantaged young people

who lack the economic capital to undertake periods of unpaid up-skilling (Buzzeo et al., 2016). Therefore people from disadvantaged backgrounds are underrepresented in the jobs which require high levels of education and training, and which are also often the most highly paid.

Young people growing up in households with minimal disposable income, and without highly educated adults around them are at a disadvantage when entering the workforce, particularly when trying to access these highly paid jobs (Haider, 2016). In this study, the children at Easton Academy are most likely to fall into this category, and the data suggests that they were, to some extent, aware of this. Many of the children had ambitious plans for the future and engaged with the meritocratic idea that if they worked hard enough they would reach their goals and achieve social mobility. But they did show some awareness of the economic barriers they might face in reaching these goals. For example, Aisha (11) wanted to become a doctor but identified both achieving sufficiently high grades and money for university as potential obstacles along this journey (see Figure 14). Several of the other children at Easton Academy identified money as a potential barrier to them accessing university education. Roberts and Evans (2013) similarly found that, despite their ambitious aspirations, working class young people were often put off going to university or accessing higher education because of the high costs associated with it. Working class young people have consistently been found to be highly engaged with the neoliberal agenda, but also aware of the difficulties they are likely to face as a result of their less privileged upbringing (Reay, 2013). These results perfectly encapsulate Mendick et al.'s (2018) concept of austere meritocracy, which explains how young people are encouraged to develop ambitious aspirations and told that they are within reach if they work hard enough, despite evidence that opportunities for social mobility are declining and that hard work is not the most significant factor in shaping individual's futures. Aisha's (11) 'Road to the Future' displays the tension between wanting to gain a high level of education to get a prestigious job and being nervous about the financial implications of this decision.

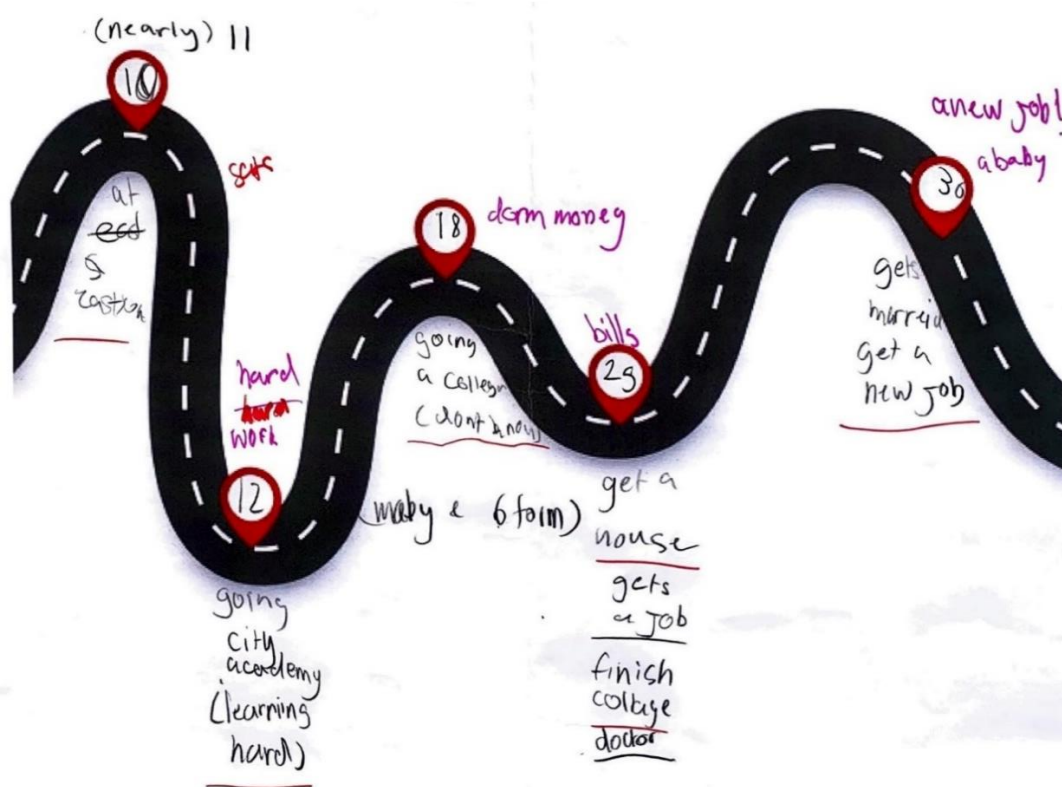


Figure 14: Aisha's 'Road to the Future'

In contrast, the pupils at both of the more privileged schools did not identify any economic barriers which might inhibit the achievement of their goals. Other than uneven gendered responsibilities, the only obstacle they identified was achieving sufficiently high grades, suggesting that they understand hard work and intelligence as the primary factor for achieving their goals. Hard work is presented in government promoted discourses of meritocracy as essential for social and economic success (Mendick et al., 2015), and the children at these more privileged schools reproduced this narrative. These different individual's understanding of what may present barriers in their futures can be explained by class privilege. Where young people have high levels of social, economic and cultural capital, they are likely to have significantly more options than those who do not, but importantly also have a safety blanket meaning they are unlikely to end up financially destitute should their future plans fail (Allen, 2015). These white, middle and upper class pupils are unlikely to face structural barriers related to their class or race (Haider, 2016), and any challenges they do face will pose less of a threat for them than their working class peers.

6.4 Conclusion

Overall, class and place significantly influenced children's imagined futures. Social class determined the kinds of jobs that children were aspiring to and their understanding of what accessing these jobs

would entail. The upper middle class children were able to provide detailed plans of how they would achieve their goals and did not identify any economic barriers which might hinder their plans. They were also highly cosmopolitan in their thinking, with their imagined futures taking place in a variety of locations. The working class children aspired to similar professional jobs but were unsure of the route they would take to achieve these goals. However, they were aware of some of the economic barriers they might face, such as the cost of higher education.

In contrast, the children at St Saviours Primary School, who fell in between the groups of children on the class and income spectrum, aspired to more creative jobs. But their imagined futures were not entirely focused on their career, with achieving a high level of general wellbeing identified as a key priority for most. They also did not identify any economic barriers they expected to face in achieving these goals. This suggests that these middle class children were less engaged with aspiration discourses than the other groups. These middle class children may not feel the pressure of gaining a well-respected job that the upper middle class children might face, but also had the financial security which the working class children lacked. They may have felt comfortable enough to pursue goals which interested them and were therefore less bound to the meritocratic system.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Research findings

This research explored a range of children's imagined futures to identify the extent to which they understand our society to be a meritocracy. This was achieved by asking the children to participate in a variety of creative tasks in order to establish whether they are engaged with the discourses of aspiration the UK government is promoting through the state education system (Spohrer et al., 2017), or whether they are aware of some of the structural barriers they might face as they grow up (Haider, 2016). It also explored the factors which influence children's imagined futures and sought to understand their effects.

The extent to which children believed in the idea of a meritocratic society varied with gender, class, ethnicity and place. Boys tended to be more engaged with meritocratic ideas than girls who showed awareness of the struggles they were likely to face as a woman, in the workplace and in their personal lives. The upper middle class and working class children were also highly aspirational in their career goals, aspiring to the kinds of high profile jobs that the neoliberal UK government promotes (Udugawa, 2014). However, the working class children were aware that achieving these jobs might be harder for them due to economic barriers such as paying for higher education, revealing that they do not believe the UK to be the level playing field aspiration discourse suggests. The lower middle class children were

least engaged with neoliberal aspirations discourses, as they aspired to typically lower paid creative jobs such as an artist or carpenter. Imagined futures and individual goals were also influenced by individual ethnicity, cultural values and place.

From these findings we understand that children are, to varying extents, aware of the tensions of austere meritocracy (Mendick et al., 2018). The children who are most likely to have been negatively affected by austerity cuts and most likely to face structural barriers in their futures are most conscious. Most of these young people are highly aspirational, but aware that achieving upward social mobility and accomplishing their goals is unlikely to be as straightforward as government rhetoric suggests.

It is worth acknowledging that this research was limited by the schools providing different numbers of children, and sometimes groups of very similar children. This limited the extent to which some factors could be explored. For example, gender was identified as an influential factor in shaping children's imagined futures, but this study was limited in its conclusions as so many more girls than boys participated.

6.2 Implications of this research

Government promoted discourses of aspiration and meritocracy are intended to encourage people to aspire to gain economically productive jobs, which will most benefit a neoliberal economy (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017). To an extent these discourses have been effective, as most young people in this study aspired to such goals. However, some are less influenced by these discourses, as shown by their creative career aspirations and prioritising of family values over making money. Additionally, some young people in this study were aware that achieving their aspirations may be difficult due to structural barriers they would face. Thus, the discourses of aspiration and meritocracy may not be as effective as the government would like. This research has suggested that young people are aware of many of the structural barriers they are likely to face, and thus the most effective way to even out disparities in educational attainment and higher level employment is to address the structural barriers young people know they are going to face, rather than encourage them out of an 'aspiration deficit' which research suggests they are not facing to begin with.

The use of the case study approach (Yin, 2009) means this research is highly context and time specific. It would be interesting for further research to explore how children's imagined futures change as they grow up, and whether they become more aware of the barriers they may face as they gain experiences. This would enable a greater understanding of how powerful government discourse is, and whether discourse or experience has a greater influence on an individual's perception of society.

7017D

It would also be beneficial to compare children's imagined futures in different parts of the country, as it is possible that belief in upward social mobility and the meritocratic nature of society would vary between areas of the UK, for example between post-industrial Northern cities where unemployment is high, and wealthy areas of an economically productive urban hotspot in the South-East.

Word count: 9,993

Bibliography

Adams, C. and Walkerdine, C. (1986) *Investigating gender in the primary school*. London: Inner London Education Authority.

Adams, J. *et al.* (2017) 'Sense of Place', in *Urban Environment Education Review*. USA: Cornell University Press.

Aldrich, H., Renzulli, L. and Langton, N. (1998) 'Passing On Privilege: resources provided by self-employed parents to their self-employed children', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, online article. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.336.434&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (Accessed: 26 March 2022).

Allen, A. (2011) 'Michael Young's The Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(4), pp. 367–382.

Allen, K. (2015) 'Top girls navigating austere times: interrogating youth transitions since the "crisis"', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(6), pp. 805–820. doi:[10.1080/13676261.2015.1112885](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1112885).

Allen, K. and Mendick, H. (2013) 'Young people's uses of celebrity: class, gender and "improper" celebrity', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(1), pp. 77–93. doi:[10.1080/01596306.2012.698865](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2012.698865).

Aloisi, A. (2015) 'Commoditized workers: case study research on labour law issues arising from a set of on-demand/ gig economy platforms', *Comparative Labour Law and Policy Journal*, 37(3), pp. 653–690.

Atkinson, W., Roberts, S. and Savage, M. (2013) *Class inequality in austerity Britain*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Banks, M. (2007) *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research*. 1st edn. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Chicago, USA: Duke University Press.

Berrington, A., Roberts, S. and Tammes, P. (2016) 'Educational aspirations among UK Young Teenagers: Exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity', *British Education Research Journal*, 42(5), pp. 729–755.

Best, R. (1983) *We've All Got Scars: what boys and girls learn in elementary school*. 1st edn. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Boshoff, J., Moore, J. and Speckesser, S. (2019) *Inequality in education and labour market participation of young people across English localities: An exploration based on Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data*. Department for Education. Available at: <https://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverbrf010.pdf>.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–58.

Brown, G. (2011) 'Emotional geographies of young people's aspirations for adult life', *Cultural Geographies*, 9(1), pp. 7–22.

Buzzeo, J. *et al.* (2016) *Tackling unemployment among disadvantaged young people*. Brighton, UK: Institute for Employment Studies. Available at: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/cpt0316.pdf>.

- Cain, R. (2016) 'Responsibilising recovery: Lone and low-paid parents, Universal Credit and the gendered contradictions of UK welfare reform.', *British Politics*, 11(4), pp. 488–507.
- Chifamba, C. (2019) 'An Analysis of how Parents Influence their Children's Career Decisions', *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 4(12), pp. 1207–1213.
- Cipollone, A., Patacchini, E. and Vallanti, G. (2014) 'Female labour market participation in Europe: novel evidence on trends and shaping factors', *IZA Journal of European Labor Studies*, 3(1), p. 18. doi:[10.1186/2193-9012-3-18](https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-9012-3-18).
- Cisneros-Puebla, C., Faux, R. and Mey, G. (2004) 'Qualitative Researchers- Stories Told, Stories Shared: The Storied Nature of Qualitative Research. An Introduction to the Special Issue.', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(3). Available at: <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/547/1180>.
- Collins, P. (1994) 'Shifting the Centre: Race, Class and Feminist Theorising about Motherhood', in *Representations of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 56–74.
- Contreras, R. (2017) 'There's no sunshine: Spatial anguish, deflections, and intersectionality in Compton and South Central', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(4), pp. 656–673. doi:[10.1177/0263775816677552](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816677552).
- Craig, L. (2007) 'Is there Really a Second Shift, and if so, who does it? A Time-Diary Investigation', *Feminist Review*, 86(1), pp. 149–170. doi:[10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400339](https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400339).
- Cummins, N. (2013) We live in a world where social class is strongly inherited. [Blog] *LSE Politics and Policy*, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/social-class/> [Accessed 13 March 2022].
- Darnon, C., Smeding, A. and Redersdorff, S. (2018) 'Belief in school meritocracy as an ideological barrier to the promotion of equality', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48, pp. 523–534.
- Devine, B.F., Foley, N. and Ward, M. (2021) *Women and the Economy*. House of Commons Library, pp. 1–26.
- Farthing, R. (2014) *The Costs of Going to School, from Young People's Perspectives*. British Youth Council, pp. 1–27.
- Forsey, A. (2014) *An Evidence Review for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom*. [online] Available at: <https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/food-poverty-appg-evidence-review-final.pdf> [Accessed 25 March 2022].
- Learning and Work Institute (2021) *Fast Forward? Where next for the labour market*. Leicester, UK: [online] Available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/fast-forward-where-next-for-the-labour-market/> (Accessed: 28 March 2022).
- Francis, B. (2002) 'Is the Future Really Female? The Impact and Implications of Gender for 14-16 Year Olds' Career Choices', *Journal of Education and Work*, 15(1), pp. 75–88. doi:[10.1080/13639080120106730](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080120106730).
- Georgas, J. (2003) 'Family: Variations and Changes Across Cultures', *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 6(3), pp. 3–16.
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1999) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. 5. paperback print. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.

- Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?*, *JRF*. [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-children%E2%80%99s-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour> (Accessed: 4 January 2022).
- Gountas, J. *et al.* (2012) 'Desire for Fame: Scale Development and Association with Personal Goals and Aspirations', *Psychology and Marketing*, 29(9), pp. 680–689.
- Gray, M. (2020) Debt begets debt. In: S. Smith, K. Moser, M. Gray and J. Gardner, ed., *Debt and Austerity: Implications of the Financial Crisis*. Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar Publishing.
- Haider, H. (2016) *Barriers to youth work opportunities*. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC. Available at: <https://gsdrc.org/publications/barriers-to-youth-work-opportunities/> (Accessed: 17 February 2022).
- Hall, S.M. (2019) *Everyday Life in Austerity: Family, Friends and Intimate Relations*. 1st edn. Manchester: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hopkins, P. (2013) 'Social Geography I: Intersectionality', *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(5), pp. 937–947.
- Horschild, A.R. and Machung, R. (1989) *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. 1st edn. USA: Viking Penguin.
- Horton, J. (2016) 'Anticipating service withdrawal: young people in spaces of neoliberalisation, austerity and economic crisis', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(4), pp. 349–362. doi:[10.1111/tran.12134](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12134).
- Jack, G. (2010) 'Place Matters: The Significance of Place Attachments for Children's Well-Being', *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(3), pp. 755–771. doi:[10.1093/bjsw/bcn142](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn142).
- Jakopovich, D. (2014) 'The Concept of Class', *Cambridge Studies in Social Research*, 14, pp. 1–30.
- JRF (2017) *Education in England*, *JRF*. [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/education-england> (Accessed: 3 January 2022).
- Kim, C.-Y. and Gewirtz, S. (2019) "'It's Not Something I Can Change...": Children's perceptions of inequality and their agency in relation to their occupational choices', *Child Indicators Research*, 12(6), pp. 2013–2034. doi:[10.1007/s12187-019-9624-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-019-9624-1).
- Kintrea, K. *et al.* (2008) *Young people and territoriality in British cities*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, pp. 1–70. [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/2278-young-people-territoriality.pdf> (Accessed: 6 February 2022).
- Lansley, S. (2010) 'How soaring inequality contributed to the crash', *Soundings*, (44), pp. 165–178. doi:[10.3898/136266210791036746](https://doi.org/10.3898/136266210791036746).
- Littler, J. (2013) 'Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of "Equality" Under Neoliberalism', *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 80, pp. 52–72.
- Malik, S. (2014) 'The dependent generation: half young European adults live with their parents', *The Guardian*, March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/24/dependent-generation-half-young-european-adults-live-parents> (Accessed: 3 January 2022).
- Maynes, M.J., Pierce, J. and Laslett, B. (2008) 'Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History (review)', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2(2), pp. 277–281.

- McGuinness, S. (2003) 'University quality and labour market outcomes', *Applied Economics*, 35(18), pp. 1943–1955.
- Mendick, H. *et al.* (2018) *Celebrity, Aspiration and Contemporary Youth*. 1st edn. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Mendick, H., Allen, K. and Harvey, L. (2015) "'We can Get Everything We Want if We Try Hard": Young People, Celebrity, Hard Work', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 63(2), pp. 161–178. doi:[10.1080/00071005.2014.1002382](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2014.1002382).
- Moen, T. (2006) 'Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(4), pp. 56–69.
- OECD, (2022) *Development Matters: Why you should care about unpaid care work*. [online] Available at: <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/> [Accessed 25 March 2022].
- Office of the Children's Commissioner, (2013) *A Child Rights Impact Assessment of Budget Decisions: including the 2013 Budget, and the cumulative impact of tax-benefit reforms and reductions in spending on public services 2010 – 2015*. [online] Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/18034/1/A_Child_Rights_Impact_Assessment_of_Budget_Decisions.pdf [Accessed 17 February 2022].
- Oliveira, Í. *et al.* (2020) 'Children's Career Expectations and Parent's Jobs: Intergenerational (Dis)continuities', *The Career Development Quarterly*, 68(1), pp. 63–77.
- Office for National Statistics. (2022) *Labour market statistics time series - Office for National Statistics*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/labourmarketstatistics> [Accessed 22 April 2022].
- Orlando, C. (2021) *A report for the Health Foundation's 'Young People's Future Health Inquiry'*. Institute for Employment Studies, pp. 5–81.
- Owens, J. and de St Croix, T. (2020) 'Engines of Social Mobility? Navigating Meritocratic Education Discourse in an Unequal Society', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(4), pp. 403–424. doi:[10.1080/00071005.2019.1708863](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2019.1708863).
- Pimlott-Wilson, H. and Hall, S.M. (2017) 'Everyday experiences of economic change: repositioning geographies of children, youth and families', *Area*, 49(3), pp. 258–265. doi:[10.1111/area.12348](https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12348).
- Powell, A., Francis-Devine, B. and Clark, H. (2022) *Youth Unemployment Statistics*. House of Commons Library, pp. 1–9. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05871/SN05871.pdf> (Accessed: 22 April 2022).
- Power, K. (2020) 'The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families', *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 16(1), pp. 67–73.
- Reay, D. (2013) "We never get a fair chance": Working-Class Experiences of Education in the Twenty-First Century. In: W. Atkinson, S. Roberts and M. Savage, ed., *Class inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Riley, D. (2017) 'Bourdieu's Class Theory', *Catalyst*, 1(2). Available at: <https://catalyst-journal.com/2017/11/bourdieu-class-theory-riley> (Accessed: 28 March 2022).

Roberts, S. and Evans, S. (2013) “Aspirations” and Imagined Futures: The Im/possibilities for Britain’s Young Working Class’. In: W. Atkinson, S. Roberts and M. Savage, ed., *Class inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rose, G. (2006) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. 2nd edn. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Rose, G. (2021) ‘Response to “Visual studies now”’, *Visual Studies*, 36(3), pp. 201–202. doi:[10.1080/1472586X.2021.1969817](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1969817).

Rowlingson, K. and Connor, S. (2011) ‘The “Deserving” Rich? Inequality, Morality and Social Policy’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 40, pp. 437–452. doi:[10.1017/S0047279410000668](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279410000668).

Savage, M. et al. (2013) ‘A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC’s Great British Class Survey Experiment’, *Sociology*, 47(2), pp. 219–250.

Smith, M. (2014) ‘The impact of austerity on schools and children’s education and well-being.’, *The encyclopaedia of pedagogy and informal education* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://infed.org/mobi/the-impact-of-austerity-on-schools-and-childrens-education-and-well-being/> (Accessed: 3 January 2022).

Smith, S., Propper, C. and le Grand, J. (2008) *The Economics of Social Problems*. London: Red Globe Press.

Spohrer, K. (2018) ‘The problem with “raising aspiration” strategies: social mobility requires more than personal ambitions’, *LSE*. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/raising-aspiration-government-strategy/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+BritishPoliticsAndPolicyAtLse+%28British+politics+and+policy+at+LSE%29 (Accessed: 17 February 2022).

Spohrer, K., Stahl, G. and Bowers-Brown, T. (2017) ‘Constituting neoliberal subjects? “Aspiration” as technology of government in UK policy discourse’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), pp. 327–342.

Strong, S. (2020) Austere social reproduction and the gendered geographies of debt. In: S. Smith, K. Moser, M. Gray and J. Gardner, ed., *Debt and Austerity: Implications of the Financial Crisis*. Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar Publishing.

Swain, J. (2000) “‘The Money’s Good, The Fame’s Good, The Girls are Good’”: The role of playground football in the construction of young boys’ masculinity in a junior school’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(1), pp. 95–109. doi:[10.1080/01425690095180](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690095180).

Tefera, A.A., Powers, J.M. and Fischman, G.E. (2018) ‘Intersectionality in Education: A Conceptual Aspiration and Research Imperative’, *Review of Research in Education*, 42(1), pp. vii–xvii. doi:[10.3102/0091732X18768504](https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18768504).

Thomas, D.R. (2003) ‘A general inductive approach for quantitative data analysis’. School of Population Health, University of Auckland. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.462.5445&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (Accessed: 17 December 2021).

Thorne, N. et al. (2019) ‘The terminology of identities between, outside and beyond the gender binary- A systematic review’, *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2), pp. 138–154.

Tichenor, V. et al. (2017) ‘Variation in Attitudes toward Being a Mother by Race/Ethnicity and Education among Women in the United States’, *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(3), pp. 600–619. doi:[10.1177/0731121416662452](https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416662452).

- Tyler, I. and Bennett, B. (2010) "'Celebrity chav": Fame, femininity and social class', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(3), pp. 375–393. doi:[10.1177/1367549410363203](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549410363203).
- Tyler, I. and Bennett, B. (2015) 'Against Aspiration', in *What is aspiration? How progressives should respond*. Centre for Labour and Social Studies, pp. 6–8.
- Udagawa, K. (2014) 'The legitimization of meritocracy in government discourse 2007-2013', *Insights*, 11, pp. 1–4.
- World Inequality Database. (2019) *United Kingdom - WID - World Inequality Database*. [online] Available at: <https://wid.world/country/united-kingdom/> [Accessed 22 April 2022].
- Wacquant, L. (2008) *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. 1st edn. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wacquant, L. (2014) 'Territorial Stigmatisation in Action', *Environment and Planning A*, 46(1), pp. 1270–1280.
- Wacquant, L., Slater, T. and Pereira, V.B. (2014) 'Territorial Stigmatization in Action', *Environment and Planning A*, 46(6), pp. 1270–1280.
- Warr, D. et al. (2016) *Ethics and visual research methods: Theory, Methodology and Practice*. 1st edn. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Watt, P. (2020) 'Territorial Stigmatisation and Poor Housing at a London "Sink Estate"', *Social Inclusion*, 8(1), pp. 20–33.
- Wiederkehr, V. et al. (2015) 'Belief in school meritocracy as a system justifying tool for low status students', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, pp. 1–10.
- Winterton, M., Crow, G. and Morgan-Brett, B. (2011) 'Young lives and Imagined Futures: insights from archived data', *Timescapes Working Paper*, pp. 1–43.
- Yin, R. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th edn. California, USA: SAGE.
- Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. 1st edn. London, UK: Thames and Hudson.