British Journal of Sociology of Education

Can high-performing academies overcome family background and improve social mobility?

Bernard Barker[a] & Kate Hoskins[b]

[a] School of Education, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

[b] Department of Education, University of Roehampton, London, UK

Published online: 11 Aug 2015.

CrossMark

Click for updates

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Can high-performing academies overcome family background and improve social mobility?

Bernard Barker[a] and Kate Hoskins[b]*

aSchool of Education, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; bDepartment of Education, University of Roehampton, London, UK

This article investigates whether schools that match Coalition Government criteria for excellence can enable hardworking students, regardless of background, to achieve good examination results and improved chances of social mobility. Students at two case-study academies were interviewed about family influences on their development and choice of education and employment pathways. In a 'best case' scenario, where prototype academies have rigorously implemented government policy, are students less reliant than before on family resources, influences and dispositions? Our data suggest that family background continues to be an important influence on participants' attitudes, values, occupational interests and preferences. There are few signs that the new academy regime is creating improved opportunities for social mobility.

Keywords: education and social mobility; inequality; disadvantage; school reform; academies; family background

Introduction

Successive Labour and Coalition governments have insisted that family background is a hindrance to be overcome so that poorer students achieve results equal to those of their wealthier peers (Gunter 2011; Riddell 2013). Schools with high expectations and excellent teaching will enable everyone to succeed. Under New Labour, academies became the preferred solution to poor examination results in disadvantaged areas (Adonis 2012); under the Coalition their number in England has expanded from 203 (2010) to 4344 (2015) ('Academies' 2015).

Coalition academies, operating within a radically reformed framework, are intended to overcome family influences on young people's aspirations and achievement, and so to increase opportunity and social mobility, specifically by closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged students (Department for Education [DfE] 2010; Her Majesty's Government [HMG] 2011). The

*Email: kate.hoskins@roehampton.ac.uk

aim is to free young people from 'the circumstances of their birth; the home they're born into … or the jobs their parents do' (Nick Clegg in HMG 2011, 3). Effective schools are seen as the main positive influence on examination results, able to enhance student performance regardless of relative prosperity or disadvantage.

Our scepticism about Coalition policy (DfE 2010; HMG 2011) is grounded in an extensive sociological literature confirming Bernstein's famous remark that 'education cannot compensate for society' (1970, 344). Our assessment of this literature (see below) is entirely consistent with Brown (2013). He claims that current policies cannot succeed because they ignore sociological evidence refuting the idea that the relationship between class origin and academic performance weakens over time, while the link between academic results and employment destinations strengthens.

Brown also presents sociology's 'inconvenient truth' (2013, 681) that the high rates of mobility achieved after World War II are best explained by absolute changes in the economy and occupational structure, rather than by a narrowing of inequalities in life chances. He concludes that policies designed to improve mobility through education have produced social congestion rather than upward mobility because the labour market is failing to meet the demand for professional occupations.

Our scepticism leads us to investigate whether the new academy regime can overcome disadvantage and increase social mobility. We present evidence drawn from 88 interviews with students in two suburban academies, and assess participants' perceptions of the role of their families in their growth and development, as well as their choice of educational and employment pathways. In our chosen 'best case' scenario, where highly rated, pioneering academies have rigorously implemented practices strongly recommended by the DfE (2010) and Ofsted (2013), are students less reliant than before on family resources, influences and dispositions? Can highly effective academies remove long-standing barriers, overcome disadvantage and increase upward social mobility?

Education and social mobility

Social mobility: policy and trends

Blanden, Gregg, and Machin's (2005a, 2005b) claim that intergenerational mobility declined in Britain between the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts has prompted a series of government strategy documents[1] asserting that upward mobility has stalled, with urgent action required to ensure fair access to a good education and better jobs. Michael Gove, Education Secretary between 2010 and 2014, asserted that his 'moral purpose in Government is to break the lock which prevents children from our poorest families making it into our best universities and walking into the best jobs' (Gove 2011). He argued that the new academies, backed by a traditional academic

curriculum, more difficult examinations and demanding performance standards, would improve social mobility for everyone (DfE 2010, 10 and 13; 2013).

This policy imperative rests on insecure foundations. Repeated analysis of large-scale national birth cohorts[2] has produced an inconsistent portrait of intergenerational variation in occupations and incomes during the post-war period. Blanden, Gregg, and Machin's (2005b) influential finding that mobility is low and falling has been undermined by Gorard's (2008, 323) critique of their statistical methods. Eleven other studies have shown increasing social mobility, 13 studies have found stability and four have identified declining mobility (Lambert, Prandy, and Bottero 2007).

Other researchers are confident that there has been little variation in upward or downward mobility rates since the early years of the twentieth century, and no significant reduction in class inequalities, despite high rates of economic growth and vast improvements in educational quality and access (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). The Coalition Government seems to have embarked on education reforms to increase mobility without first establishing a full picture of key trends, and without acknowledging other influences on social fluidity.

School effectiveness

Policy-makers seem equally optimistic in their belief that effective schools are 'an important means of implementing policies intended to combat social disadvantage' (Sammons and Bakkum 2011, 9). Serious doubts have been raised about school effectiveness research (Gorard 2010) and in any case 'schools only rarely overcome the relative differences between the performance of different social groups' (Mortimore and Whitty 2000, 22).

National datasets show a persistent correlation between standardised GCSE point scores and relative wealth at all schools, with achievement levels dispersed across the spectrum of inequality (Cook 2012[3]). The type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lives seems a more reliable predictor of his or her GCSE performance than any other information held about that student on the Pupil Level Annual School Census database (Webber and Butler 2005). Socio-economic status remains 'the most powerful predictor of student success' (Leithwood and Jantzi 2000, 422).

The relatively poor performance of children in receipt of free school meals has not improved since 2007/08, despite great efforts to 'close the gap' (Deputy Prime Minister's Office [DPMO] 2011). Reay believes the 'attainment gap between the classes in education is just as great as it was 20, 50 years ago' (2006, 304). The recent finding that international educational scores are closely related to income inequality and 'more unequal states have worse educational attainment' confirms the link between relative wealth and educational outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 105).

Inequality, rather than a particular level of social deprivation, seems to be the major influence on school performance. As Crawford et al. (2011) conclude, it is very hard to increase social mobility without tackling the various forms of structural inequality. It is doubtful whether academies can have a significant impact on the very large achievement differences between successful, better-off students and those who are eligible for free school meals.

Sociological evidence

Despite these challenges, governments since the 1980s have been strongly influenced by the alleged demise of class politics, the erosion of older collective identities, and by the rise and spread of a culture of individualism and the economics of individualisation (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). Ministers are drawn to effectiveness studies that emphasise the role of individual schools in raising achievement (for example, Rutter et al. 1979) and blame bad schools and bad parenting, rather than social class or disadvantage, for attainment differences (BBC 2009; DfE 2010; Gewirtz 2001).

This stance ignores a mass of sociological evidence (Brown 2013), including research on 9500 seven year olds from the Millennium Cohort Study (see note 2) which shows that however good or effective the parents, they cannot overcome the structural problems of poverty (Hartas 2012 quoted in Reay 2013). Working-class and middle-class patterns remain sharply different, with class 'everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted' (Reay 2006, 290). An individual's sense of agency in education is 'heavily structured by social class' (Vincent 2001, 348). Gregg and Macmillan (2009) draw on two British birth cohorts (see note 2: National Child Development Study, from 1958; British Cohort Study, from 1970) to conclude that childhood circumstances have a profound effect on subsequent outcomes.

Family background and early experience also help account for differences in children's responses to school and subsequent opportunities. An extra £100 per month in income when children are small is associated with a difference equivalent to one month's development and this dissimilarity is not fixed at birth but widens through childhood (National Equality Panel 2010). Data from the Millennium Cohort Study (see note 2) show that differences in children's intellectual, emotional and behavioural development, by parental income group, emerge at an early stage, as soon as the third birthday, and have great significance for their later achievements (Ermisch 2008). Thompson and Simmons (2013) conclude that class-based inequalities have resisted our best efforts to overcome them, while the influence of educational attainment on achieved status has remained stable since the mid-twentieth century.

The persistence of stable, unequal social structures, despite massively increased expenditure on the school system (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007),

discourages confidence in the transformative power of education. Bourdieu (1986, 248) argues instead that social stability results from 'the contribution the educational system makes to the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital'. Schooling facilitates cultural reproduction rather than social mobility or change and so assists the transmission of class advantage rather than the closure of performance gaps (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Social inequalities are maintained through the unconscious transmission of family habitus and dispositions.

Cultural capital, transmitted through the family, seems to have a significant, cumulative impact on children's socialisation and their development as people (Bourdieu 1977; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Differences in 'the cultural logic of childrearing' provide middle-class children with particular advantages but also with the skills needed to negotiate their life paths (Lareau 2002, 748). Working-class students seem to be disadvantaged, compared with their middle-class peers, by their limited pre-disposition towards the 'accumulation of additional capitals' (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013, 741) and by limited access to material resources.

Ball and his colleagues were surprised that families proved a more significant component of young people's social and educational experiences than they expected. Families played a key role in career or life planning and were also important in helping the new generation form social perspectives and generate resources for identity formation (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). Processes of socialisation and identity formation help explain why less privileged students remove themselves from higher status choices and trajectories (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996).

Despite this abundant evidence showing that social inequalities cannot be dissolved by individual reflexivity (Li 2013) and academic aspirations, policy-makers have persisted with an individualist perspective. This has been encouraged by the large-scale quantitative designs (based on national birth cohorts) that have predominated in social mobility research. These have compared fathers' and sons' incomes at fixed points in their working lives, while women, welfare dependants and others missing from the workplace have been omitted altogether (Lambert, Prandy, and Bottero 2007). Such statistical studies 'resemble the observation of a carnival through a keyhole' (Bertaux and Thompson 1997, 6) and do not much aid our understanding of the complex role of the family in social mobility.

By contrast, sociologists of education have accumulated a mass of research on student identities, aspirations and educational experiences, but their failure to engage in broader debates around intergenerational mobility has limited their impact and influence (Brown, Reay, and Vincent 2013). We aimed to analyse how families influence young people's educational and career decisions and thus make a contribution to the wider social mobility

debate. Can the new academy regime overcome family background and so improve the chances of social mobility?

Methods

This interpretive, qualitative study, based on interviews with students, examines the ways in which family experiences have influenced participants' development, and evaluates the impact of high-performing academies on their educational and employment choices and pathways. We draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to make sense of the 'durable dispositions' transmitted through family socialisation, and to examine the ways in which family resources pass between generations (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). Habitus characterises the recurring patterns of social class, social mobility and class fractions – that is, the beliefs, values, behaviour, speech and dress – that are inculcated within the family, particularly in early childhood (Bourdieu 1977).[4] We adopt Bertaux and Thompson's (1997) case-study approach to qualitative mobility studies.

Sample

Two highly effective case-study schools, with comprehensive but above-average intakes, were chosen because they match policy-makers' expectations for the conditions believed to foster social mobility. An age 11–16 school (South Park) and an age 11–18 school (Felix Holt) were selected to facilitate comparisons and contrasts between final-year students as they prepared for public examinations at age 16 and age 18.

South Park and Felix Holt (pseudonyms) are state-of-the-art academies, prototypes for a new generation of high-performing schools designed to overcome family circumstances that are believed to narrow life chances and reinforce persistent patterns of inequality (HMG 2011). The two academies, much admired in their respective neighbourhoods and highly praised in recent Ofsted Reports, are believed to offer capable and committed students excellent access to good teaching, good examination grades, good universities and good opportunities for social mobility. Both attract balanced intakes, but have fewer students eligible for free school meals than the national average.

Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Senior teachers at each school identified one group of very able students, defined as those estimated to achieve grades A* and A in all subjects (group A), and another group representing the rest of the ability range, defined as those estimated to achieve grades A–E in their examinations (group B). These samples were designed to capture differences in students' perceptions related to their ability, school track record, social background and gender. We are aware that class generalisations risk merging 'a plurality of differences' into broad

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Academy pseudonym	
	Felix Holt (interviews conducted April 2012)	South Park (interviews conducted February 2012)
School age range	11–18	11–16
Sample age range	17–18	15–16
Number in year group	95 (Year 13)	192 (Year 11)
Gender		
Group A (students estimated grades A*/A in all subjects)	7 female, 11 male	12 female, 12 male
Group B (students estimated grades A–E across subjects)	13 female, 11 male	10 female, 12 male

categories or 'binaries' (Reay 1997, 225), so we invited participants to describe their family status and economic circumstances in their own words and interpreted the data in relation to the theory of habitus.

Sample construction was purposive, in seeking students to match defined criteria, but also opportunist because we invited senior teachers at the schools to select participants and accepted changes to those listed for interview on the day in light of operational requirements and the non-attendance of some individuals.

Interviews

We conducted semi-structured paired interviews (each of 30-minute duration) with 88 student participants to gather rich, detailed and descriptive accounts of their experiences and expectations (Bassey 1999). The meanings the participants 'attach to their environment and relationships' were explored (Williams 1998, 8). The interview questions were designed to elicit the participants' perceptions of their present circumstances and future plans and to capture their understanding of their experience.

Ethics

The study was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA 2011) ethical guidelines. Participants were volunteers interviewed with their parents' consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. They were advised that data would be held securely and that confidentiality would be protected by the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying factors.

Family background and influences

Supportive families

A high proportion of participants cited particular examples of their parents supporting and helping them, for example, with extra-curricular activities and work experience. Hannah (SP: A)[5]. said her parents played a vital role in her life:

> My parents are very encouraging in terms of prompting me, getting me to places on time, encouraging me to organise, my Dad is always trying to advise me; always trying to do what's best for me in my school work, helping with projects.

Jack (FH: A), like many others, emphasised a good relationship with both parents that 'makes me feel relaxed at home and allows me to do work'. Jordan (SP: B) explained that his mother is 'behind me the whole time, encouraging me, helping me at home'. Although none of the participants were discontented with the overall level of help and support they received from their parents, there were occasional criticisms of one or other parent, especially in the case of divorce or separation. Alice (SP: B), for example, said her mother was her main support:

> I'm trying to prove my dad wrong because he thinks I'm a waste of space. I'm trying to prove I'm fine, he wants me running back to him, he left me as a child, I've grown up with my mum. It's made me more independent and more determined. My mum has motivated me to carry on with what I want to do; she's the one who has given me the support I need.

Other students emphasised their father's contribution. Harry (FH: B) said his Dad has 'always been there for me, I look up to him a lot, he's always given me his full support', while Tony (FH: B) reported that his father had encouraged him to go to university when 'my mum didn't want me to go'.

Most students agreed about their need for support, as well as their resistance to overt pushing. Faith (SP: A) appreciated the fact that her parents 'don't push, they know what I can do, they know what I can get and see no point in pushing harder'. Mark (SP: A) sees himself as very fortunate because 'my family gives me lots of support behind whatever I do, so I don't feel pressured to do things'.

Resources and identity

Parental occupations contributed to participants' growing sense of personal identity and status. Elijah (SP: A) referred to his parents' work as leading researchers to explain his own international academic aspirations. Sean's (SP: A) parents are both university professors and this seems to have shaped his desire to become a researcher.

Less advantaged group A students tended to identify with a parent or parents who showed skill and determination in overcoming financial difficulties. Andrew's (FH: A) lone-parent mother 'enabled him to spend thousands on cameras, despite "harder than most" financial circumstances'. He aligned himself with her skills and work ethic. Lucy (SP: A) was plainly discouraged by her father's spells of unemployment and reduced status. Fortunately her mum is 'good with money', so the family has been able to fall back on investments and savings.

Illness and poverty were formative elements in some family histories, with long-term consequences for participants' self-perceptions and life chances. Anna (SP: B), for example, comes from a large, disadvantaged family that has been unable to pay for school trips, fashionable clothes or even materials for GCSE art. She has helped with her brothers and sisters at home and this has led to work experience at a nursery and the prospect of a child-care course at a local further education college.

Leah (SP: B) is expected to achieve B grades at GCSE, but her brother has heart disease and everyone in the family has been affected by his need for continuous care. Her father is unable to work through illness, and her mother has never been able to work because of her son's problems. Income is 'a slight problem'. Leah has issues with depression and has missed lots of lessons.

These examples illustrate the extent to which young people's identities are related to family resources and to their perceptions of parental status and attitudes. Their narratives reflect the influence of family habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and provide evidence of the enactment of social reproduction theory.

Family values and culture

Participants acknowledged the pervasive influence of family values, climate and culture on their behaviour and aspirations. Mia (FH: B), for example, was aware that she acts 'a lot like my parents, talk like them, believe in the things they do. I'm an atheist because my mum is.' She was expected to achieve high grades and hopes to study history at a pre-1992 university. Jason (SP: A) emphasised his Quaker background and said he tries to abide by the basic principles he has taken from it. Values like equality, trust, integrity and truth are important for him. Jacob (SP: A) was very conscious of his parents' influence, and argued that without strong values at home many students just opt out.

Rob (FH: A) acknowledged his parents influence but said the future was 'all down to me'. Max's (SP: B) parents have experienced poverty and homelessness but he is 'entirely grateful' that he has learned a lot from a difficult life and has been brought up to live off the fruit of his own labour on the family vegetable patch. Julian (SP: B) said his father, who works as

a mathematics teacher, has encouraged him to be as independent as possible, mainly because his own father left him when he was small. So he bought Julian a paper round business to run.

Rose (SP: A) was appreciative of the values and culture espoused by her academic parents. They never put pressure on her 'because they know I'll do it for myself' but from a young age treated her as an adult and involved her as an equal in 'intelligent conversations around the dinner table'. She has always loved 'academia, knowledge and learning, especially in scientific research'. Faith's (SP: A) parents have moulded her 'by following important values needed to succeed in life', such as equality and politeness. Zara (FH: B) is strongly influenced by her mother's ethos of hard work and by her uncle's success in establishing several businesses before the age of 30. She has 'a few ideas for my own business, perhaps a cake shop or selling jewellery'. Some participants reported that family experiences had made them cautious or described their parents as risk averse. Charlotte (FH: A) said her parents' attitude had made her consider a safe career as a primary school teacher.

Participants described how they were raised, and remembered parents who encouraged reading, intelligent dinner-table conversation or an interest in the wider world. They praised the care and support provided by loving families and resist pressure towards an absent parent's goals. They often reflected their mother and father's values and commitments. The issue is not that some children are helped or hindered by relative advantage or disadvantage but that home, family history and disposition are intrinsic, continuing dimensions of socialisation and education. Habitus conditions every student's engagement with formal learning and contributes greatly to the diversity of response and achievement (Bourdieu 1977).

Family interests and vocations

Most students reported interests and hobbies derived from their families, including grandparents. Interests said to have originated with other family members were often linked with participants' choices of subject and career pathway. Isaac (SP: B), for example, accounted for his passion for animals in terms of his upbringing. His parents 'always had animals' and he has pets that 'I look after myself'. He hopes to work in a pet shop after a course at the local college.

Darren (FH: B) said his uncle is a football coach who taught him the basics when he was young. Darren has already been offered a full-time job at a premiership soccer club, responsible for running after-school clubs to teach skills. Several families passed on an interest in the arts significant for their children's cultural development and career plans. Louise's (FH: B) father used to 'draw all the time' and she has always been interested in art. She is working on her portfolio to gain admission to a leading art school.

Faith's (SP: A) father introduced her to the local youth drama group and she is now contemplating a career in the performing arts. Daniel (FH: B) said he was seeking an internship with a music studio as an entry point for the wider music industry. The main influence comes from his father, who has 'played the guitar since I was born or before'.

Some participants were reluctant to follow the example of parents and grandparents but found themselves drawn, nevertheless, towards interests and activities related to family precedents. Owen's (SP: A) grandfather is an actuary and both his parents are scientists. He was reluctant to study science and mathematics because his parents work in that area but admitted he genuinely cannot imagine doing anything else and does not think he would enjoy alternative subjects so much. By contrast, Rachael (FH: A) was pleased that her extended family has helped in developing her communication skills and desire to study foreign languages.

Our data are consistent with other qualitative studies that have found a strong continuity of interests and vocational orientation within families. As Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) suggest, the social capital most often employed was embedded in family networks. Apparently instinctive dispositions seem to be internalised as family habitus and resources are transmitted between generations (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). Apparently individual choices also belong to a wider pattern of adaptation to economic opportunity and change (Bertaux and Thompson 1997).

Family employment patterns and influences

Many participants said parents were a strong influence on their occupational choices and indicated that family members work in similar occupations. Group A students at South Park named a range of academic, scientific and technical interests and aspirations that were closely related to their parental backgrounds. Rose (SP: A), for example, whose father holds a PhD in chemistry, aimed to study natural sciences at Cambridge before progressing to a PhD herself: 'I want to do something to do with academia, knowledge and learning is what I've always loved. Especially in scientific research.' Zoey (SP: A), whose parents are both scientists, identified marine biology or high-energy physics as potential areas of doctoral study. Sean (SP: A), whose parents are both professors, wants to work in science, although he does not have a particular course in mind: 'I'd like to study at a high level, in a lot of detail.'

Family connections and influences were equally important for group B members at South Park, especially in accessing local opportunities. Sandy (SP: B) already worked on Saturdays at her mother's hairdressing salon and described plans for improving the business when she qualified. Patrick (SP: B) was expecting C grades but liked doing hands-on work and had no desire to sit in an office. His parents wanted him to be a plumber and

regarded it as a 'good trade'. He also thought plumbing was an attractive career option. Gavin (SP: B) was keen to follow his father into the police force.

Although young people exercise agency, their aspirations are shaped by family habitus and by their sense of what is normal for people 'like me' (Bourdieu 1977). The concept of economic, cultural and social capital, transmitted through the family and community, helps make sense of the dissimilarity between groups A and B at South Park, especially in their attitudes towards available academic and career paths (Bourdieu 1986).

A majority of students at Felix Holt reported two or more relatives in similar or related jobs, evidence of occupational links across generations of the same family. Lance's (FH: A) father and grandfather were telecommunication engineers, for example. Both of Jack's (FH: A) parents are accountants, while three of his grandparents were involved in motor transport. Lucy's (FH: A) mother and paternal grandfather were both telephone company managers. Rachael's (FH: A) father and three of her grandparents were involved in carpentry or gardening. Rebecca's (FH: A) family includes three teachers. Seven students reported family members involved in engineering, electronics and electrical work. Charlotte's (FH: A) father and grandfather were trade managers, while her mother is one of three teaching assistants in the cohort whose children plan to become teachers.

Several group A members said close relatives inspired their career preferences. When Lance (FH: A) was young, for example, he spent a lot of time at his grandfather's house and remembers that 'he was always doing electronic stuff and that has led to where I am now'. At the time of his interview, Lance had decided to become a chartered engineer and recognised that his grandfather (an electrician with BT) and parents helped develop the groundwork for his career through extra-curricular activities, trips and work experience.

Michael (FH: A) also reported that he had picked up a lot of knowledge and understanding from family members involved in engineering. Rebecca (FH: A), whose grandmother was a nurse, feels that her mother has been overbearing in her 'desperation for me to become a doctor', but she nevertheless values her family's encouragement to pursue a medical career and their practical help with work experience.

These manoeuvres illustrate the influence of family habitus as well as the sophisticated ways in which family resources may be deployed to maintain status and class advantage, with successful parents offering informal guidance and access that smoothes the path towards highly regarded universities and occupations (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). Economic capital appears to play a significant role in acquiring experience that enhances the chance of success in graduate labour markets (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013).

Less academic students (grade C or lower) were also aware of the need to mobilise available family resources to secure a toehold in the job market. Tony (FH: B) had already worked for his father and was prepared to sacrifice his independence for the time being. Dave (FH: B) was also realistic and recognised that it would be difficult to follow his father into the police: 'You can work as hard as you like but if they are not recruiting, they are not recruiting.'

Simon (FH: B) is an example of a group B student who expected to succeed despite less strong predicted grades. He explained how he would enter the media and work his way up through family contacts. One relative owns a media production company and has contacts at the BBC; his father's partner is a television director who has worked with celebrities on cooking shows. The contrast between Simon and other group B students confirms that socio-economic status is a significant influence on occupational goals, and that young people's aspirations are shaped by their identities, embodied practices and structural locations (Archer, Mendick, and Hollingworth 2010).

Young people at both schools, regardless of background and ability, acknowledged the importance of family influences on vocational choice. This is consistent with a study of 444 participants interviewed between 1969 and 1973 that showed parents, older siblings or nearby kin were instrumental in arranging three out of every four posts obtained (Vincent 1997). It also confirms that parents routinely mobilise resources to help their children 'through the education system and into good jobs' (Devine 2004, 11).

Advantaged, disadvantaged

There is troubling evidence that patterns of inequality continue to be 'imprinted from one generation to the next' (HMG 2011), despite the positive outlook promoted by both schools and displayed by almost every student. Participants who described their families as less advantaged or mentioned adverse circumstances, such as low status or broken employment, economic pressure, ill health and family break-up, also presented less promising academic profiles and were more likely to study for vocational qualifications.

A high proportion of South Park group A students said they were advantaged and many reported that their parents held positions as academics, scientific researchers and teachers. Rose (SP: A) said she was 'reasonably advantaged'. Sean (SP: A) said he is advantaged because both his parents are professors, while Jacob (SP: A) felt 'privileged because we have a nice house' and the 'financial crash hasn't affected us'. Students who identified themselves as coming from 'average' backgrounds were more cautious. Sophie (SP: A) said her 'family is about average, we don't have masses of money but are not exactly poor'. No group A student considered themselves disadvantaged, under-privileged or poor.

By contrast, a majority of the South Park group B believed they were average or disadvantaged, and made numerous references to financial pressure, family break-up, illness and disability. Occupational backgrounds were mainly related to the local economy (e.g. hairdresser, decorator, cleaner) and included periods of unemployment. Max (SP: B) remembered that his parents were 'living in a squat when I was born' and said the family has 'never really had much money'. Anna (SP: B) admitted that 'we're quite disadvantaged, we don't get as much money as others, it affects going on school trips and things'.

A minority of Felix Holt students deemed themselves to be advantaged. Charlotte (FH: A) considered that she has been 'quite lucky', while Jack (FH: A) said his family was probably 'a little above average in that parents have well paid jobs' but explained his mother was only part time and his father's wages have to be 'shared out amongst four children'. Gemma (FH: A) was appreciative of the advantages she enjoyed but also acknowledged that her father had been made redundant, so could no longer afford to send her round the world, like people she met on interview at a prestigious university.

A majority of Felix Holt students described themselves as 'average' but also mentioned a variety of domestic pressures. Andrew (FH: A) said that he was living in a tight financial situation, while Michael (FH: A) noted that 'as the recession hit my step dad found it hard to get work and money became tight and there have been cutbacks'. Holly (FH: B) felt that 'we're comfortable at the moment but we're living on savings rather than current income'.

Group B students at Felix Holt were more likely to mention personal experiences of separation and divorce, and the resulting financial consequences. Darren's (FH: B) father left when he was two days old, so 'my knowledge of his background is minimal, I'm not even sure of his country of origin'. Simon (FH: B) spent a lot of time travelling between his father in London and his mother who lives near the school, while Joyce (FH: B) referred to her parents' divorce and being brought up by her mother over the last 10 years. She felt that divorce and financial difficulties have brought them 'down in the world'.

These stories help explain why a large minority of students at South Park (33%) and at Felix Holt (40%) fail to attain the much desired, mobility-friendly good GCSE threshold (5 A*–C grades including English and mathematics). The schools may well enjoy balanced intakes with fewer free school meal students than average, but less advantaged students continue to trail their peers – however dedicated their teachers and however determined they are themselves. Poorer students continue to achieve less good results, even at highly effective schools (Cook 2012).

Conclusion

These stories challenge, therefore, the policy consensus (Riddell 2013) that family background is an obstacle to aspiration and achievement to be overcome. Instead, they suggest that the concept of social mobility is a 'mirage' (Reay 2013, 662) which masks complex processes of social reproduction within which families and schools work to reproduce the social order. Although South Park and Felix Holt are high-performing academies, there is little evidence that less fortunate students have improved their chances of escape from subordinate positions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Advantaged and disadvantaged participants alike quoted countless instances of family support and encouragement and emphasised the importance of positive family relationships for their own happiness. Students from poor backgrounds were equally likely to speak positively about their parents' care and attention. Caring families played an important role in enabling the young people to sustain their effort. But our less advantaged, less successful participants illustrate the finding that working-class parents' attitudes and actions have far less influence on their children's educational outcomes than family income and parental education (Hartas 2012 quoted in Reay 2013).

Our case studies confirm that good schools can create a climate where students work hard and aim to achieve great results. But it is much less clear that the effects of structural and material disadvantage can be overcome. Less successful students at both schools were more likely to assess themselves as 'disadvantaged' and their families were very often troubled by financial, emotional and health issues. Group B members were also more likely to be following vocational tracks towards less prestigious employment.

Family background and resources were a significant influence on participants' growing sense of personal status and identity. The majority of South Park group A members were strongly aware of their parents' professional occupations and regarded themselves as intelligent, capable people. They spoke confidently about their options and careers and assumed they would study at prestigious universities before progressing to high level, knowledge-based work. Some less advantaged students identified with mothers or fathers who have overcome redundancy, unemployment and financial difficulties, and succeeded too in holding their families together. For some students, illness and poverty had a long-term negative influence.

Students were also influenced by family values, climate and culture. They often attributed their interests and vocational plans to other family members. Family dispositions were important, with interests in art, music, languages and sport emulated and developed by the next generation. The concept of habitus helped us make sense of the recurring patterns of social

class, social mobility and class fractions inculcated by everyday life within these families (Bourdieu 1977).

There are few signs that our two 'best case' academies have overcome family influences or reduced the effects of relative poverty. Our sample seems no less influenced by family and community antecedents than previous generations, with many participants' career tracks and choices deeply rooted in patterns established by parents, grandparents and relatives. This study shows that for our participants, regardless of background, family is not an independent variable to be overcome but the source of a rich mixture of dispositions that are imprinted through childhood and play a vital part in their growth, learning and outlook (Bourdieu 1977).

Although there is much to be done to understand how social inequality results from the interplay of classrooms, schools and the wider society (Collins 2009), our students' stories show that their parents, siblings and other significant relatives worked to produce social stability rather than change, and document processes of social reproduction rather than those of transformation. Social mobility is indeed a mirage, based on the false hope of 'making the many behave like the few' (Gewirtz 2001, 136) and the illusion that effective schools can somehow 'overcome' family habitus and disadvantage itself.

Our participants exercise an individual agency that encourages them to believe the future is in their own hands (Archer, Mendick, and Hollingworth 2010) but, below the surface, habitus ensures that life and fate are subject to the 'past experiences … deposited in each organism' (Bourdieu 1990, 54). Agency and structure seem to intertwine to produce young people whose choices and behaviour are related to their family habitus and dispositions. Our evidence is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977) cultural theory of social reproduction and confirms Brown's (2013) claim that there is little hope of improving social mobility without first tackling the underlying causes of social inequality and congestion. Our research shows that significant resources are needed to make an impact on structural and material inequalities between families.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Labour documents include Cabinet Office (2008), HMG (2010) and the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (PFAP 2009). Coalition proposals are presented in DfE (2010) and HMG (2011).
2. Four major studies have provided much of the data used in social mobility analysis: the National Child Development Study, from 1958; the British Cohort Study, from 1970; the British Household Panel Survey, from 1991; and the Millennium Cohort Study, from 2000.

3. Chart reproduced in Hoskins and Barker (2014, Figure 2.1).
4. See Hoskins and Barker (2014) for full discussion of habitus theory.
5. Interviews cited as pseudonym (e.g. Jack), school (FH, Felix Holt; or SP, South Park) and group (A or B).

References

Academies and free schools – Education. 2015, January 27. *Parliamentary Business, Publications & Records*. http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/258/25804.htm

Adonis, A. 2012. *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Archer, L., H. Mendick, and S. Hollingworth. 2010. *Urban Youth and Schooling*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Ball, S., M. Maguire, and S. Macrae. 2000. *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New Youth, New Economies in the Global City*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Bassey, M. 1999. *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bathmaker, A.-M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. "Higher Education, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals: Recognising and Playing the Game." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 723–743.

BBC. 2009. "Heads Told: No Excuse for Failing." BBC News Education. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7831922.stm

BERA. 2011. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. London: BERA. http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/Ethical%20Guidelines

Bernstein, B. 1970, February 26. "Education Cannot Compensate for Society." *New Society* 389: 344–647.

Bertaux, D., and P. Thompson. 1997. "Introduction." In *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility*, edited by D. Bertaux and P. Thompson, 1–31. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Blanden, J., P. Gregg, and S. Machin. 2005a. *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America*. London: Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics. http://www.learningdomain.com/CaseStudy.IntergenerationalMobility.pdf

Blanden, J., P. Gregg, and S. Machin. 2005b. "Social Mobility in Britain: Low and Falling." *CentrePiece* Spring: 18–30. http://cep.lse.ac.uk/centrepiece/

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson. Translated by R. Nice, 241–458. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 1993. *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P., and J.-C. Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Brown, P. 2013. "Education, Opportunity and the Prospects for Social Mobility." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 678–700.

Brown, P., D. Reay, and C. Vincent. 2013. "Introduction: Education and Social Mobility." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 637–643.

Cabinet Office Strategy Unit. 2008. *Getting on, Getting Ahead. A Discussion Paper: Analysing the Trends and Drivers of Social Mobility*. London: Cabinet Office Strategy Unit. http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/66447/gettingon.pdf

Collins, J. 2009. "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38: 33–48.

Cook, C. 2012, February 22. "The Social Mobility Challenge for School Reformers." *Financial Times [FT Data]*. http://blogs.ft.com/ftdata/2012/02/22/social-mobility-and-schools/#axzz1o06SJkBJ

Crawford, C., P. Johnson, S. Machin, and A. Vignoles. 2011. *Social Mobility: A Literature Review*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Devine, F. 2004. *Class Practices: How Parents Help Their Children Get Good Jobs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DfE. 2010. *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper*. London: The Stationery Office.

DfE. 2013. *Draft National Curriculum Programmes of Study for KS4 English, Maths and Science*. London: DfE. https://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum2014/a00220610/draft-pos-ks4-english-maths-science

DPMO. 2011. *Attainment at Age 16 by Free School Meal Eligibility*. London: DPMO. http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/attainment-age-16-free-school-mealeligibility

Ermisch, J. 2008. "Origins of Social Immobility and Inequality: Parenting and Early Child Development." *National Institute Economic Review* 205: 62–71.

Gewirtz, S. 2001. "Cloning the Blairs: New Labour's Programme for the Resocialization of Working-Class Parents." *Journal of Education Policy* 16: 365–378.

Goldthorpe, J., and M. Jackson. 2007. "Intergenerational Class Mobility in Contemporary Britain: Political Concerns and Empirical Findings." *The British Journal of Sociology* 58: 525–546.

Goldthorpe, J., and C. Mills. 2008. "Trends in Intergenerational Class Mobility in Modern Britain: Evidence from National Surveys, 1972–2005." *National Institute Economic Review* 205: 83–100.

Gorard, S. 2008. "A Re-Consideration of Rates of 'Social Mobility' in Britain: Or Why Research Impact is Not Always a Good Thing." *The British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29: 317–324.

Gorard, S. 2010. "Serious Doubts about School Effectiveness." *British Educational Research Journal* 36: 745–766.

Gove M. 2011. "The Moral Purpose of School Reform." Address at the National College for School Leadership, Birmingham, June 16. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-on-the-moral-purpose-of-school-reform

Gregg, P., and L. Macmillan. 2009. *Family Income and Education in the Next Generation: Exploring Income Gradients in Education for Current Cohorts of Youth*. Working Paper No. 09/223. Bristol: Centre for Market and Public Organization.

Gunter, H. 2011. *Leadership and the Reform of Education*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Hartas, D. 2012. "The Achievement Gap: Are Parents or Politicians Responsible?" Bera Insights. Issue 2 Summer 2012.

HMG. 2010. *Unleashing Aspiration: The Government Response to the Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, CM7755*. London: The Stationery Office.

HMG. 2011. *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility*. London: Cabinet Office.

Hodkinson, P., A. Sparkes, and H. Hodkinson. 1996. *Triumphs and Tears: Young People, Markets and the Transition from School to Work*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Hoskins, K., and B. Barker. 2014. *Education and Social Mobility: Dreams of Success*. London: Institute of Education Press.

Lambert, P., K. Prandy, and W. Bottero. 2007. "By Slow Degrees: Two Centuries of Social Reproduction and Mobility in Britain." *Sociological Research Online* 12(1). http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/1/prandy.html

Lamont, M., and A. Lareau. 1988. "Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments." *Sociological Theory* 6: 153–168.

Lareau, A. 2002. "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families." *American Sociological Review* 67: 747–776.

Leithwood, K., and D. Jantzi. 2000. "Principal and Teacher Leadership Effects: A Replication." *School Leadership & Management* 20: 415–434.

Li, H. 2013. "Rural Students' Experiences in a Chinese Elite University: Capital, Habitus and Practices." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 829–847.

Mortimore, P., and G. Whitty. 2000. *Can School Improvement Overcome the Effects of Disadvantage?* London: University of London Institute of Education.

National Equality Panel. 2010. *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK*. Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, Report 60, Summary. London: Government Equalities Office.

Ofsted. 2013. "Press Release: Ofsted: 'Too Many of England's Poorest Children Continue to Be Let down by the Education System'". June 20. http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/ofsted-too-many-of-englands-poorest-children-continue-be-let-down-education-system

PFAP. 2009. *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions*. London: Cabinet Office.

Reay, D. 1997. "Feminist Theory, Habitus, and Social Class: Disrupting Notions of Classlessness." *Women's Studies International Forum* 20 (2): 225–233.

Reay, D. 2006. "The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social Class and Educational Inequality." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54: 288–307.

Reay, D. 2013. "Social Mobility, a Panacea for Austere times: Tales of Emperors, Frogs, and Tadpoles." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 660–677.

Riddell, R. 2013. "Changing Policy Levers under the Neoliberal State: Realising Coalition Policy on Education and Social Mobility." *Journal of Education Policy* 28: 847–863.

Rutter, M., B. Maugham, P. Mortimore, and J. Ouston. 1979. *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*. London: Open Books.

Sammons, P., and L. Bakkum. 2011. "Effective Schools, Equity and Teacher Effectiveness: A Review to the Literature." *Profesorado: Journal of Curriculum and Teacher Education* (University of Granada) 15: 9–26. http://www.ugr.es/~recfpro/en/?p=581

Thompson, R., and R. Simmons. 2013. "Social Mobility and Post-Compulsory Education: Revisiting Boudon's Model of Social Opportunity." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34: 744–765.

Vincent, D. 1997. "Shadow and Reality in Occupational History: Britain in the First Half of the Twentieth Century." In *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility*, edited by D. Bertaux and P. Thompson, 98–123. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Vincent, C. 2001. "Social Class and Parental Agency." *Journal of Education Policy* 16: 347–364.

Webber, R., and T. Butler. 2005. *Classifying Pupils by Where They Live: How Well Does This Predict Variations in Their GCSE Results?* London: UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis. Working Paper No. 99. http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/publications/workingPaperDetail.asp?ID=99

Wilkinson, R., and K. Pickett. 2010. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Williams, M. 1998. "The Social World as Knowable." In *Knowing the Social World*, edited by M. Williams and T. May, 5–21. Buckingham: Open University Press.